THE WHITE BADGER

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TO THE READER

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THE WHITE BADGER

Mr. Talbot's first novel, *Love in Danger*, was remarkable both for its strength of plot and vigour of style. One felt on reading this book that the author knew what he was writing about, and, what is even more important, knew how to write it.

The White Badger again combines these two excellent points and results in a first-class novel. The hero, from whom the story takes its name, is worthy of a place amongst the first half-dozen popular heroes of the day. In his family the white-haired men had earned for themselves the reputation of "the choicest dare-devils of the whole unruly gang." Nor does he belie this reputation. Throughout the story he appears a devil-may-care figure, for ever full of fun, yet with nerves of steel. Readers of the author's first novel will not be disappointed in his second as they follow the White Badger on his manifold escapades on sea and land.

Starting in a newspaper office, the story sweeps on in a breathless manner to the south-west of England, and then to a thrilling chase across the Channel in a motor-boat. Love, excitement and danger are all here, handled in Mr. Talbot's inimitable style as he skilfully brings the story to a tense climax.

By the same Author

LOVE IN DANGER

THE WHITE BADGER

BY

CARL TALBOT

ELDON PRESS LIMITED
CURZON STREET
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All the names mentioned in this story are names of purely fictitious persons

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CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	THE WRECK	9
II.	A PRESS INTERVIEW	24
III.	HIGH FINANCE	36
IV.	THE NEW PROPRIETOR	44
V.	A FLIP	58
VI.	A CHANGE OF SCENE	74
VII.	COUNCIL OF WAR	91
VIII.	AT THE TOWER	98
IX.	IN THE TOWER	114
X.	A RE-SHUFFLED ALLIANCE	120
XI.	THE RESCUE	131
XII.	THE PURSUIT	145
XIII.	AT THE FARM	159
XIV.	THE SETTLEMENT	164
XV.	A BRAIN-WAVE	179
XVI.	AT THE OFFICE	191
XVII.	ESTIMATING THE SPOIL	196
XVIII.	CODDINGTON REDIVIVUS	207
XIX.	AN UNEXPECTED REPERCUSSION	219
XX.	PHYLLIS	227
XXI.	GIVING HER HER HEAD	240
XXII.	THE MANDARINS	247
XXIII.	ALL AT SEA	259
XXIV.	LANDFALL	277

CHAPTER ONE

THE WRECK

In the midst of her increasing disgust Enid Petersham suddenly decided she would like a cigarette and promptly pulled up her car with a jerk. The splutter of the engine as it stopped coincided with her own sigh of relief for the short respite—to drive along a bad coast road in a gale that threatened any moment to heel the car over was an exasperation, especially when one was there on the wrong road through sheer carelessness.

She opened her hand-bag for cigarettes and matches, but, with the habit common to all women, paused to glance at herself in the small toilet mirror. Some of her black waving hair had to be pushed in more orderly fashion beneath her beret. Large dark eyes glanced back at her from an oval face of delicately olive complexion. Her vivid red lips pursed in appraisal of what she saw—she was thoroughly grimy, she decided. A few moments' work did something to remedy this; she lit her cigarette and lolled back moodily in the driving seat.

What a day it had been! Her absurd employer, Trevor Craven, had, of course, let her in for the whole business. He knew nothing about journalism, but imagined he could wisely direct her as to what people to interview and how to interview them. His first selection had been Frank Coddington, just because Tubby Burton, the business manager of the paper, had told him she had already met Coddington. Already

met him! She knew Frank so well that without seeing him again she could write reams about him. This fact she had kept to herself; if she was to be afforded a pleasant two days away from London visiting the south coast, far be it from her to crab the affair.

And pleasant it had at first promised to be. When she left London that morning there was every indication of a glorious spring day. After fifty miles' travelling south-west she ran into fog. This would probably have been bad enough to hold her up, had not a wind come with it and thinned it out. Now, at four o'clock, there was no fog and she had only about ten miles to go, but she had got on to an execrable road, and the wind screeched round the car and buffeted it till her head ached with the racket.

She glanced through the windows of the car as she smoked. Ahead the nondescript road curved away, keeping fairly level and running between irregular hedges and banks. Away on the left, a quarter of a mile across rough pasture-fields, was the cliff edge and the sea. She supposed she could see the Channel, but at that height and distance it was impossible to be sure. Sea and sky were alike grey, a vast expanse of changing tones, drifting and intermingling; there was no horizon visible. On the cliff's edge was a knot of human figures—six or seven men apparently. She wondered idly what they were doing. Overhead, flying high, a few gulls sailed with the wind inland. She had heard they went inland before a storm. On her right hand the land rose gradually to a line of low hills roughly parallel with the sea. The scene was pleasant but quite ordinary in character, a varied pattern of small farms, arable and pasture land, coppices and a few private houses probably belonging to small gentry.

More insistent than anything except the wind was the salt smell of the sea in the air; indeed the wind must have been full of fine spray, for it felt wet, and already, although there was no rain on the seaward

side, the windows of the car were "frosted" over with points of moisture.

The view in any case was not exhilarating, and in her present mood she found it depressing. She decided to drive on.

Just as her foot moved to the electric starter, her attention was arrested by the sudden appearance of two men and a youth of about seventeen. They hurried from behind a line of hedge that had concealed them from view, scrambled recklessly over a stretch of laid quickset hedge, and dropped panting into the road about twenty yards from her. With them they lugged a heavy coil of rope—no mean burden over rough ground and in a gale of wind. They obviously noticed her car, for one man delayed the others who were hurrying by pointing in her direction and making some excited suggestion, which she, of course, was quite unable to hear. Evidently they both agreed with him, for they dropped their rope on to the road, and the first man broke into a run and made for the car.

Enid Petersham always disclaimed the possession of "nerves," but she was no fool, and not knowing what was toward, she lost no time in starting her engine and getting into bottom gear. She had only to slip in her clutch and she was away—if necessary through the whole bunch. But the face that presently appeared at the window of the driving-seat was utterly disarming—honest, grizzled, fatherly and vastly perturbed. Moreover, its owner was greatly disappointed to see her.

"It's a girl," he cried, and both the tone of his voice and the expression of his face conveyed his frank disgust. But he recovered himself in a moment.

"Sorry, miss," he panted. "I never thought but to find a man in the car, and me all in a hurry, too."

This was no scamp, but an honest man in trouble. Enid shut off her engine; to talk against the noise of the gale was quite sufficient a task.

"Why, what did you want?" she demanded brusquely, for the man was already turning away.

"We thought you might give us a lift down the sea lane with this rope. It's main heavy to carry and wanted bad, for there's a ship ashore yon." And with a wave of his hand he indicated the direction of the knot of figures she had already noticed on the cliff's edge.

Her response startled him; as he told his cronies afterwards, never had he seen a female get off the mark so quickly.

"A wreck! I'll take you," she cried, and simultaneously the cigarette flew through the window, her hands dropped to the controls and the engine burst into life. With a rush she took the car along the road to the two with the rope and flung open the doors of the saloon.

"Throw the rope into the back and climb in," she ordered, and then to the first man, as he ran alongside, "You sit beside me and tell me the way."

"Straight ahead for a hundred yards and then turn left," he shouted, as he slammed the door of the moving car.

"'Struth, she can shift," ejaculated the youth in the back seat—meaning Enid, not the car. She had got under way in about fifteen seconds. Racing her engine recklessly, she changed up through her gears, and ten seconds later took the left-hand turn into the sea lane on two wheels.

"God 'a mercy! " gasped the man in front. "Don't smash up, miss. That won't save us no time."

"You're all right," she shouted. "Hang on. I know what I'm doing."

The sea lane was narrow but free from sudden bends, so that Enid never had less than forty yards clear view ahead. Moreover, although its surface was rough, all ruts and pot-holes had recently been filled in by some efficient person. Enid blessed him whoever he was, and did the lane at thirty-five, her passengers

hanging on as bidden. A chorus of yells apprised her when she was nearing the end.

She slowed. "Can I get along the cliff?" she shouted.

"Yes, if you're careful." The tone was somewhat dubious. "Turn left."

The grass verge of the cliff was as good a surface as the lane, and quite wide. Nowhere in the hundred yards she had to cover was she forced within six feet of the cliff's edge. She pulled up with a squeal of brakes by the knot of helpers.

The ride all told had taken a minute and a quarter —none of the men ever forgot it; it became their classic anecdote.

The three leaped out of the car and dragged the rope to the cliff's edge; the other helpers, except for three, all old men or youths, surged round them. Enid cautiously turned the car round in case she should be asked in a hurry for further service, and then, putting on her mackintosh, joined the others at the cliff's edge.

At first glance she failed to see the wreck, which was lying close to the foot of the cliffs, which were two hundred feet in sheer height. Leaning over still farther, she caught a glimpse of it, broadside on the land. She was not affected by heights, but decided that to fight against the gusts of a gale as one leaned to look over a two-hundred-foot cliff was a foolishly dangerous proceeding. Accordingly she lay down full length on the damp grass, and with head thrust over the edge made a safe examination of the disaster.

"That's right, miss," quavered one of the old men. "You can't be over careful in a wind." He was too old to give any active assistance, and advice was superfluous, so he bent his rheumatic joints and crouched beside Enid. Here was someone to whom he could talk; she would be interested to know how it had happened, would this young miss. "German tramp . . . about 2,000 tons . . . ran ashore in the fog . . . tried to pull off, but went farther on the rocks . . . hopeless now."

The old man's voice reached her in a series of wailing shouts uttered between the more strident wind squalls. Either because of excitement or because of the gale he wheezed and panted so that his scraps of information were doubly fragmentary and intermittent.

It was difficult to realize, thought Enid, that the ship was 2,000 tons in size; her surroundings dwarfed her, and the frantic waves that swept white across her made her seem as insignificant as she was helpless. That she had made her last voyage seemed to Enid beyond question. Her fore and after-decks were never clear of the breakers, which would soon tear off her hatch-covers if they had not already done so. The worst of the waves were breaking over her forecastle and leaping madly at the higher structure amidships. On the captain's bridge and the boat deck around the funnel she could see specks moving, the heads and shoulders of men hurrying for dear life to abandon ship. As they scurried to and fro a dull, grinding, clangorous sound rose repeatedly through the roar of the storm. At each repetition the figures would pause a moment and then hurry once more. It was the ship grinding to pieces; she had still some buoyancy left, and the waves used it to her undoing; they lifted her with their irresistible swell and then dropped her down on the rocks beneath her keel. Her knell was being rung by giant blows upon her own body.

From the boat amidships to the outlying rocks that buttressed the foot of the cliffs was some twenty yards. Across this gap the Germans had slung a rope, and were now about to make their hazardous passage along it, by swinging hand over hand, one by one, from the ship to the shore.

One man was already ashore, having landed when the tide was lower and made fast the rope which even then they all realized would probably be their last hope. Now, the tide having risen still further, the space between the ship and the shore was a gully in which

the surf rose and fell, advanced and retreated, with a fury that bewildered the eye with the infinite variety of its changing forms.

"They should ha' landed sooner," wheezed the old man to Enid, "but the tide was rising and they tried to warp her off with a kedge anchor at the end o' one of their wire ropes. The rope broke and they went hopelessly aground right up on the rocks. Her bottom must be stove in by now."

"But if they had landed before, you couldn't have got them up the cliff, for you've only just got a rope," objected Enid.

"No," said the old man, "but they wasn't to know that. For aught they knew we had ropes, and they should ha' bin sensible and come on to the rocks. It was pure ill luck we had no ropes."

"Why?" asked Enid mechanically; her attention was directed to the long brown snake of rope, looped at its lower end, which the men were lowering down the cliff.

"Jem Halliday, him that takes the sea-gulls' eggs for the market each spring, only him has a rope, bar the coastguard, fower mile along the cliff. So Bill Edwards—that's him on the cliff edge now—he runs wi' his son to Jem's. Jem had gone to Shipston, and his wife said there weren't no rope. Last year's ropes were worn and rotten, and he had cut 'em up. But his missus said he had ordered new 'uns and Farmer Upton should have 'em at his farm by now, having promised Jem to bring 'em from Marlemouth last market-day. So to Farmer Upton's they ran—a matter of another two and a half miles. And then they couldna find ropes till they found him in the far corner of the farm. He'd only one after all; nor was there a horse in the yard or anything to bring it on. All away in the fields. So they dragged it across theyselves for quickest, till they met you. Whereabouts would that be, miss?" queried the tired old voice.

But Enid had barely heard him; a swinging blob

that showed white against the boiling surf was painfully creeping along the rope from the ship to the shore. The first of the Germans. Half-way across, where the sag of the rope was lowest, he disappeared in a flurry of white. Had he gone? She held her breath for a moment. The surf sank, the blob was still there; for a moment it hung stationary and then began once more its slow, hazardous progression. It reached the rocks. Another began the crossing.

Enid had assumed that the rescuers' rope was already down the cliffs; but a sudden smother of curses overtopped the noise of the wind, and a glance at the men, obviously excited, told her that something had gone wrong. She scrambled to her feet and joined the group. Their curses were easily intelligible, and the situation plain; the wind had swung the rope over a bulge in the cliff face more than half-way down, and there it had wedged in a crack. Neither shaking nor pulling would loosen it and, as the one rope they had represented only half of the full cliff-climber's kit, unless they could free it with its full length intact, they could not reach the foot of the cliffs and the stranded Germans. These for the moment were safe; but in an hour the full tide with the gale behind it would wash them like chips of wood off the rocks. A few wild suggestions were made and received coarse and summary dismissal. The men growled blasphemously in their impotence—twelve to fifteen seamen were to be drowned before their eyes owing to this one odd break of evil chance.

Enid felt her throat grow tight with horror. Could no one think of a plan? Apparently not. She couldn't.

At that moment she felt someone brush past her; a new-comer thrust his way into the group, and the most impressively authoritative voice she had ever heard said quietly:

"Let me have a look at that rope, Edwards."

"Yes, sir," agreed the countryman immediately, and

put the rope into his hands. None of the others said a word.

The stranger studied the situation in silence for a moment, and the eyes of everyone were fixed on him. He was perhaps thirty, tall and as lean and lithe as a hound to judge by his figure. In features his face was very clear cut, almost harshly incisive; his eyes, Enid saw when he turned, were a cold blue-grey. She noticed he wore a black beret—a head-gear she hated for men. He ran the rope through a pair of slim hands that looked all bone and sinew.

"All of you get on this rope and pull," he ordered.

They all did so, including Enid and the old man; but the rope merely stretched slightly in its newness; its far end remained anchored firm and immovable.

"Good," said the man, as though the sure foundation of his hopes had just been established. "I'll go down the rope and get the end loose."

A chorus of horrified protest broke from the men, a babel of dissuasion. Edwards was the only one really coherent, and he spoke at some length.

"The rope's too thin to give you a good hand-grip, sir, and, if it should come loose from the rock afore you're there, you'll swing back and brain yerself agin the cliff for certain. And suppose you get down to that bulge where it's caught, the odds are you can't get it loose; there's barely standing room for a cat."

The stranger would have none of this—he could grip the rope; it would not come loose accidentally, for it had defied all their efforts to wrench it free; once he got to the bulge he could deal with the rope; in short he was going.

The man completely dominated them, so that they abandoned their protests and listened keenly to his instructions—they were to keep the rope taut till he got to the bulge; when he waved twice they were to lower away; four waves and they were to haul; if he waved three times they were to stop.

He slipped off his sports coat, pulled his beret firmly on his head, grasped the rope and lithely slid over the edge of the cliff.

To assume control, size up the situation, issue instructions and get into action had taken him merely four or five minutes from his first arrival. Enid Petersham had not met a man of this quality before.

She lay at full length and watched him slowly descend hand over hand, the rope running between his legs, which were hooked over it. She had a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach, and her hands went wet with perspiration. Of the men by her, some could see him, and those hanging on to the rope could not; but of them all not one spoke. On the rocks below the Germans stood motionless, a group of white specks, fourteen upturned faces watching a human fly apparently crawling across the cliff face. Enid counted the fourteen specks twice; the effort distracted her attention from the dark speck that moved down the rope and dwindled to less and less as it descended.

Would he never get to the bulge? The minutes seemed interminable. The watch on her wrist, by her face as she lay there, ticked away with insistent intensity; time had not stopped, but God! how slowly it went! However, on and on, down and down he moved. When he was nearly there she wondered whether at the last moment, from weariness and strain, his grip would relax. In imagination she saw him fall, and in horror closed her eyes.

When she opened them again he was standing on the bulge with his back to the cliff, resting. He was a hundred and twenty feet down, eighty feet above the rocks, and to her he looked like a large doll. The Germans stood as in a trance, though spray flew round their heads and a thin, angry surf swirled between their legs. Life or death hung in the balance for the man on the cliffs, and their fate marched with his.

He stayed motionless on the bulge of rock for five

minutes, and then waved twice. The watchers on the top gave the order to lower away. The rope slowly began to slither over the cliff edge.

He waved three times, and they stopped.

Enid watched the tiny figure stoop slowly and with infinite caution on the precarious platform. He remained thus for about a minute. She imagined that he was either working the rope loose or cutting it. Slowly and with the same caution he straightened himself and gave the signal to lower.

They lowered away, not at all understanding why, and expecting every moment a change of orders. But it never came. They paid out all the rope until its far end lay on the rocks; but that tiny, precariously perched figure still stood on its ledge. Moreover, the rope was not within reach of the Germans. Between them and it, in the rock of the shore, was a deep, twenty-foot channel, along which a cataract of surf hurtled into the shallow arched caves that honeycombed the foot of the cliffs. What would he do, she wondered.

Slowly he moved and, by almost imperceptible degrees, slid down behind the bulge to disappear for a time and then reappear once more clinging to the rope and steadily descending.

"My God!" gasped Edwards, "he's cut the rope, slung it loose round the bulge clear of the crack, and is going down with it like that. If it slips off the rock he'll swing across the face of the cliff for fifty feet and smash to pulp. Keep still! Keep still! Don't let the rope move an inch."

The men saw that it did not. Enid choked and was sick.

By this time the small figure was moving very slowly. He was taking longer to do the eighty feet than to do the hundred and twenty. He was tiring. Would he last out? Enid hurriedly moved along the cliff to get a better viewpoint from which to gauge his progress. Forty feet to go, thirty-five, twenty, only fifteen. But

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fifteen was too far to fall on those rocks, and he scarcely seemed to move. Was he hanging blindly with his last ebbing strength? No, he was moving. Ten feet, five. He was down.

Enid was some fifty feet away from the rope at the finish, so that she distinctly saw him land. He collapsed on the rocks and lay like a log.

He rested again for five minutes and then, clambering seawards across the rocks as far as he dared, he pulled and shook the rope clear of the bulge, so that it curved up directly from him to the men on the cliff top. He gathered up the slack into a coil, amid flying spray returned across the rocks to the foot of the cliff, and advanced till he came to the seething channel that cut him off from the Germans. For a time she lost sight of him, and then he clambered on to a large rock and was plainly to be seen, tiny but indomitable—the epitome of fearless determination.

As far as she could distinguish he seemed to be winding the spare rope round his body, but what his intention was she could not guess.

It was soon apparent, for with a wave of his hand to the Germans, he sprang from the rock and, trusting to the rope, swung like a bob on a long pendulum straight through the chaos of surf and across the channel. The Germans received him with open arms, despite the fact that his advent was like that of a battering-ram; six were knocked down and sent sprawling in the surf; but the rest brought him to a safe standstill.

Fifteen specks congregated round the rope, and then came two waves from one of them.

"Haul! " yelled Edwards.

In a couple of minutes a head appeared at the edge of the cliff. It was the ship's boy, blue-eyed, blond, nearly exhausted. He stifled a whimper, jabbered in German and produced a note written on a sodden envelope.

"Tie something heavy and big to the end of the rope so that it will not swing a second time."

Enid read it and immediately fetched the spare wheel off her car; there was nothing else handy.

After this the business grew rather monotonous to watch, but arduous for those who hauled at the rope.

German after German was brought up and dragged over the edge of the cliff. It was suggested they made their way to the nearest farm, which was pointed out to them across the fields. But even those in the poorest case refused to budge till everyone was up, and those that had any strength left hitched themselves on to the rope and hauled.

"He, of course," Enid remarked, "will come up last."

The perspiring and panting Edwards nodded his agreement.

They were correct; the fourteenth man up was the German mate who had first landed on the rocks to rig the life-line. He was a giant of a man. There was no room for him on the rope to haul, so he clung to the cliff's edge.

"To see de Engleeshman goom up," he explained. "He say to me, 'Visitors first,' and made me goom up. I vait for him."

He never took his eyes off that solitary figure round which the surf swirled at the foot of the cliff; every inch of the rope as it was hauled in passed through his hands as he hung over the edge of the cliff; and when at last that coldly clear-cut face, topped by its black beret, was drawn level with the turf, it was the brawny hands of the German that seized the Englishman by the wrists and hauled him the last few feet to complete safety.

Then they mobbed him, German and English alike, surging round him, yelling their acclamation. The mixture of the two tongues produced a bedlam.

Enid suddenly discovered that she felt strangely tired now everything was over, and sat herself on the running-board of her car.

Eventually the tumult died down; the man with the

beret had disentangled himself from the mob and was talking in German to the huge first mate. Edwards brought the spare wheel back; regretted the many scratches it had received and thanked her for helping them.

"Why ever should you thank me? You have done far more yourself. Who is to thank you?"

"Oh, these chaps," he answered with a grin, indicating the Germans, "but people that live by the sea don't look for thanks. They give help knowing that some day their turn'll come to be helped. That's true mostly everywhere by the sea, the world over."

"Do any of these men want a lift?" she asked.

"No," he said, "they're all too wet for your car, and they had best walk to get their blood going. The rope'll be nothing to carry among the crowd of us."

She wished him good day and prepared to go.

The man with the beret had given away all his cigarettes and taken his leave with a casual wave of his hand. They roared a good-bye that embarrassed him. As he was passing Enid, impulsively she held out her hand without a word. For one flickering instant his cold grey eyes raked her face, and then a smile like that of an impudent, devil-may-care schoolboy swept across his face.

"Thanks awfully for the wheel," he said. "Hope we haven't bust it."

"Not at all," she answered. "It wouldn't matter if you had. But have you far to go to get changed? Can I give you a lift?"

"Thanks very much. But if you won't think me rude I'd better refuse. Unless I have a run and warm up thoroughly I'll get a touch of my old tropical ague. Sure you understand?"

She nodded with a smile.

"Good-bye, then," he said, and vaulting the fence made off across the fields at a long, swinging trot.

Enid started up her engine. One of the youths of the original party passed by the car.

"Who was that gentleman?" she asked.

"Him!" cried the youth, in apparent surprise at the question. "Why, that's the White Badger of course," and he hurried away after the Germans and their rescuers, who were stringing out in a long procession across the fields.

"The White Badger," murmured Enid. "What an extraordinary name and what a remarkable man."

She turned into the lane once more and drove on.

She had yet to reach Frank Coddington and interview him. What a day, as she had said before.

CHAPTER TWO

A PRESS INTERVIEW

FRANK CODDINGTON'S home was a long, low house that sprawled on the cliffs amid a half-circle of stunted pines and looked south over the sea. Originally it had been two pairs of back-to-back cottages. Their builder had dreamt not of perishable things, the rock of which they were built and that on which they stood seemed alike enduring. For some reason, no longer apparent, he had built the pairs in line, but some fifteen feet apart. In this space Coddington had built a hall and staircase to which he had reconnected the rooms of the cottages. The resultant house was quaint, old-fashioned and sprawling, but very comfortable.

Enid had been there before and liked it. With great relief she drew up there about six; the gale was abating, the weather thickening once more and, despite the time of the year, there was not much light left.

The blast of her horn brought Coddington to the door.

"Hallo, Frank! I'm here," she announced.

"I'd given you up long since," he proclaimed, as he helped her out and took her suit-case. "Never mind the car. I'll put it in the garage for you. Where have you been? All the way round by Mabel's? I might have told you she was away and saved you the trouble. She's gone to Bath. I'm surprised you . . ." The spate of his words rushed on.

Enid was accustomed to the preliminary volley with which he always opened conversation. Coddington had hurried her up the steps and into the hall before she could tell him she had not been to Mabel's but had

been delayed on the road. A maid hovered in the background.

"Nellie will show you up to your room. While you are powdering your nose we'll try to hurry dinner up—we were going to have it at seven in any case; Aunt Lou has to go out. Vicar's wife sick. She'll be back later to chaperon you," he added as an afterthought. "You'll be safe for the night."

"Your sound-box runs in top gear as well as ever," she remarked, with one foot on the stairs to which he had hustled her. She liked this good-natured rattle-box, and thought Mabel Renshaw lucky, though she did not envy her.

"I ought to be fitted with a silent third, you mean. You are as rude as ever. Hurry up; you need feeding." He grinned down at her from his height of six feet two, laid a huge hand on her back and gave her a gentle thrust to remind her of the stairs that awaited her weary feet.

She went.

She was down again in a quarter of an hour, and found her host and his aunt awaiting her. Dinner was ready to be served. Aunt Lou was a big jolly woman of fifty; she might easily have been Coddington's mother, and was often taken to be so. She apologized for not receiving Enid, and explained she had been getting a few things ready to take to poor Mrs. Oakley, the vicar's wife. Then followed an account of the dear lady's present fleshly trial. Aunt Lou was as vocal as her nephew; had she not been, life with him would have been impossible. She would have been overwhelmed. This occurred to Enid as she listened, and she wondered how Mabel would face the strain; would she become loquacious in sheer self-defence, develop a protective deafness, or quieten her husband by more subtle wiles? The problems of matrimony, she decided, were many and varied.

An incautious remark, that she did not know they

had a vicar within miles, evoked the explanation that the vicarage was two and a half miles away, and that led to the further explanation of the far-flung extent of his parish, and the problems that naturally attended such a difficult ministration.

Coddington left the field to his aunt; he was busy eating. As he occasionally explained to his gibing friends, a man his size simply had to eat to keep going; it was no use making a pretence of the matter, one really had to eat. In this necessity, Enid thought, lay a possible avenue of escape for Mabel when married, or, if not an avenue of escape, yet a means of defence that would afford many respites of blessed quietude.

In the course of the meal she was suddenly surprised by an opportunity to make the long overdue explanation of why she had arrived so late. Hurriedly, as one who knows the fleeting nature of happy chance, she mentioned the fog, the wind, the bad coast road taken by mistake, and the wreck. They demanded to know if the men had been got off, paused long enough to enable her to say yes, and then told her of two other strandings that had occurred farther down the coast that very day in the selfsame fog. Both aunt and nephew had been interested spectators of the re-floating of the boats—both had been got off. They gave the account in duet.

Eventually, with apologies, Aunt Lou refused coffee and hurried away to condole with the vicar's wife in her dispensation. Coddington led Enid across to his den.

"Coffee tastes better there than anywhere else in the house. It's quiet."

Having planted Enid in a huge chair by the fire and provided her with coffee, he poured some for himself and laced it with rum—a refinement Enid declined as barbarous. She accepted a cigarette and was relieved to see him stuffing a huge briar with flake. The colour of the tobacco was ominously black; but if he smoked

she might have opportunity to get in an occasional word; her hopes rose accordingly.

"Now tell uncle all about it," he advised, when he had settled himself. "You weren't very coherent on the phone. Something about an interview; but I got the impression you had been sacked and wanted me to adopt you. Have you put the suggestion to Mabel? She's really very broad-minded, and if approached tactfully . . ."

Enid seized a cushion to hurl at him, but he leaned over and grabbed it without getting out of his chair. He had a reach like a gorilla.

"If I didn't succeed in making myself plain it was because you kept interrupting, and you never listen to what anyone says because you're busy thinking what you are going to say next."

"Enid," he retorted with a grin, "I value you for your originality. Don't copy Mabel. I've heard all that before."

"The wonder would be if you hadn't. Now do be quiet. You got hold of just one word, 'interview.' Hang on to it."

He nodded, lolled back and applied another match to his pipe, which glowed and emitted black fumes. The scene was set.

Enid began: "As I tried to tell you, old Felix Rowley has sold our paper, *The Woman's Sphere*, and the new proprietor, a lunatic I have not yet met, is butting in via Tubby Burton, the business manager, to tell me how to do my job. He wants a series of interviews with, or articles by, men of various professions, common or uncommon. The skirted animal will be interested, so he thinks, to learn how the superior sex wins the wherewithal to keep wife and home."

"Good idea," growled Coddington, a light beginning to glow in his eye. He swallowed in premonitory fashion.

Enid silenced him with a frantic gesture and continued:

"That's not all; he knows exactly how the stuff should be written up. First, the man given in snappy character sketch; then, his job indicated with all the concrete points obtainable. Take you, for instance—his first choice."

"Why did he hit on me?" asked the big man. "No reason beyond my eminence in the geological world and my fame as a braver of the wilds?"

Enid undeceived him. "He had a whole list which he put into Tubby's hands. Tubby runs down it with his eye, but can't think of anything bright to say. 'Miss Petersham can begin with Coddington, then,' remarks our wise man. 'One's as good as another; but his name spells gold, and gold's in the news just now.'

"To come back to his concrete points. I know all about you and your stone-cracking treks; but that's by the by. I'm to ask you such questions as these: What technical education and qualifications are essential for your job? Any other qualifications? What special opportunities and permanent posts are open to you? Is the profession good financially? The spectacular side of your work as an explorer is familiar to all; but what do you have to do behind the scenes? For instance, what reports do you have to make to the Government after such a trip as the one you made three years ago into Ngamya? Can you show me a copy, not for the information in it, but just to give me an idea what it is like? And so on and so forth, *ad infinitum*. If the man has his way my readers will drop dead from boredom. Or rather they would if they had to read the paper, but they won't, they'll just chuck it."

Coddington had long since finished his coffee and had changed over to whisky and soda. He took a heavy pull at his glass and rose to the occasion.

"Easy," he chortled, "listen to me. You need to be highly intelligent, of the soundest moral character,

and altogether exceptional in physique—like me. After an absurdly expensive education at Eton, where you learn to wear a top hat and a bottom-starver with elegance, you proceed to the varsity, in other words, Cambridge. There you are involved in still further educational expense, not to mention what goes in side-lines and incidentals. Finally, you are supposed to emerge with a double first in geology and mining engineering. At this point you are called upon to demonstrate the possession of a quite unexpected qualification, you have to be damn fool enough to accept a thankless job from the Government on the strength of a suggestion in the background, that, if you make good, you will be given a fat Government post and henceforth be a made man whom all the world will respect.

"You undertake twelve months' hard labour worse than is known in the nightmares of all the convicts in Dartmoor for £1,000, plus recognized expenses and the cost of a stipulated kit. You spend a lot of your screw on making your kit reasonably good, and you come back so fed-up that on reaching civilization you blue the rest.

"You write your reports, send them in, draw the balance of your pay to meet your overdraft, and then—no promised job. After this you settle down to develop the commercial value of your scientific education and unique experience by writing adventure yarns for schoolboys and city clerks. Incidentally you do better than if you got the Government job.

"The report you send in is so very dry that nobody will read it unless they have to—it is intended to be a White Paper. No, I can't show you a copy; it would be against regulations as my report has never been published; incidentally, though I took a carbon copy, I believe I used the blank sides of the sheets to take a copy of my masterpiece, 'The Hooded Cobra of Yahoostan,'—where it is now G.O.K."

He swallowed the rest of his whisky and soda at a draught.

Enid sat silent; she felt momentarily stunned.

Coddington re-lit his pipe, which proceeded to give an excellent imitation of a hookah and bubbled merrily. He began again.

"And who is the bright boy who thought of this scheme and sent you down to me?"

"I told you," she retorted feebly, "Trevor Craven."

A sort of geological joy seized Coddington, he rumbled like an earthquake, burst into a roar of laughter, and slapped his thigh with a noise like the cracking of a pit roof.

"Not Trevor Craven! Don't tell me it's *the* Trevor Craven!" he bellowed. "The chap with the white hair?"

"I tell you I haven't seen him," snapped Enid, "but I know what you are thinking about; his reputation is common knowledge."

"I should think it is," chuckled Coddington. "You'll have to leave, my dear, and come to live with your old uncle. You won't be safe for a moment. We'll go and see Mabel about it first thing in the morning."

"Don't be a fool," snapped Enid once more, this time genuinely annoyed. "I don't think divorce court notoriety a laughing matter."

"It was in his case," declared Coddington, quite unabashed. "Didn't you read the case?"

"No," said Enid emphatically. "I don't take the same Sunday newspaper as you."

Coddington was irrepressible. "It's no good, Enid, I was in court—quite by accident—and I know. I never laughed so much in my life. In fact, I was one of those who got turned out for laughing. About fifty of us there were—some of them real nibs. The judge nearly had a stroke. In fact, he died twelve months after, and some said he had never got over the shock

of that case. He was a stiff Nonconformist, and it fairly bent him."

This aspect of the case was news to Enid and whetted her curiosity—a true sense of humour is non-moral. She remained silent; that was all the encouragement Coddington required.

"The original trouble was between Phyllis Cotton, the variety star, and her husband, Coutts-Frazer, who was a pretty nasty beast in general, drank heavily and gave her a thoroughly bad time. He wouldn't let her go. She wanted a quiet divorce, but couldn't find the necessary evidence, though pretty sure that it must exist. Altogether she was wound up to a pitch of thorough desperation when she ran into Trevor Craven, whom she'd known years before. As a matter of fact they had been great pals when mere kids. Naturally he took her side, and in any case, where women are concerned, he seems to have a queer streak of chivalry in him.

"Things suddenly moved. Phyllis had been right; Coutts-Frazer had an outside interest—a dashing young widow who lived out at Banstead, where she posed as a model of discretion. Off her native heath where no one knew her it was another matter. They both favoured a quiet, select little hotel in one of the backwaters of the West End. There one week-end, about 2 a.m., there was a bogus fire-alarm which for five minutes seemed to be the real thing—plenty of smoke, smell and uproar. The widow and Coutts-Frazer rushed out of the same bedroom in night attire and downstairs before a score of witnesses. The fire brigade turned up too, and there was much publicity, principally because the L.C.C. objected to one of its brigades being hoaxed, and offered a reward of £50 for the miscreant whose mind ran to such practical jokes. A good many people were ready to guess in one who was responsible, but couldn't prove it.

"All this was jam for Phyllis; Coutts-Frazer hadn't a leg to stand on, and the case came forward undefended.

"Old Utteridge was the judge. He was not used to the divorce court, and hated the work; but there was so much sickness on the bench that he had been pulled in to help to reduce the list. As he listened to the evidence he glowered, and things went swimmingly for Phyllis till just before the end. Then the King's Proctor intervened, some miserable hound having put him wise at the very last moment.

"He did not rebut the evidence; but it appeared, in some way not explained, that Craven had been a gleeful witness of the stampede in the hotel and had promptly hurried away at that early hour of the morning to carry the glad news to Phyllis in her flat. This had been indiscreet; but worse followed. Phyllis had been most grateful, in fact had reached the pitch of being reluctant for Craven to take his departure. Well, he had been quite disinterested in all he had done, but, faced with such a situation as that, it wasn't in him to be rude to a lady. So he stayed.

"But my hat! you should have seen old Utteridge. He was a queer old bird in any case, hunched up and puffy, like a hen about to lay a double-yoked egg. When all this came out he swelled and went purple in the face with righteous indignation.

"Then some fool laughed and set the rest of us off. It was a shame we got turned out, for I believe what he said about Craven is now accepted as the classic example of cold judicial vituperation. He threatened him with prosecution for conspiracy; but nothing came of it."

Enid made it a practice never to laugh at Coddington, whatever he said—it was bad for him. So she remained silent a moment and then decided:

"Of course your perverted sense of humour has tricked the whole affair out so that it seems merely a farcical joke. I'm still not reconciled to my employer's reputation and wish I hadn't to meet him; I suppose I shall have to some day."

"Sure thing," agreed Coddington cheerfully, "in fact you might easily have run against him any of the times you have been knocking round this part of the country. His family belonged down here—they were rather an ancient clan; he's the last—and he has patched up the old family ruin as a kind of shooting lodge. Drops in pretty frequently, but never for long, nor does he mix much. He prefers to scour round in his old clothes; most of the farming and fishing folk on the countryside and coast know him, I imagine; though they won't think of him as Trevor Craven, but as the White Badger."

Enid leapt out of her chair. "What?" she cried.

"Dear me!" remarked Coddington, always very gratified to make an impression. "I seem to have kicked a corn. The White Badger, I said."

"Then I've met him this afternoon. He was the man who went down the cliff; I told you about him."

"Never a word," contradicted Coddington. "It's evidently one of your guilty secrets."

"I intended to," insisted Enid, "but I suppose I had to leave it unsaid, as there was no gap in your eloquence. I'll tell you now if you can contrive to listen."

Coddington did contrive. "That's the White Badger," he agreed at the end. "There isn't a doubt, though you couldn't see his hair."

"What's wrong with his hair?" demanded Enid.

"White," announced Coddington laconically. "It makes him look most distinguished. That's why they call him the White Badger."

"But that's a perfectly ridiculous name to give anyone," she objected.

"Maybe," conceded Coddington, "but it's the only ridiculous thing about him and he cannot be held responsible. As I told you, his family is very old, and in general the males have been as lively a series of dare-devils as you are likely to hear of anywhere. But

every few generations the family seems to have thrown up an odd member who went prematurely grey—he wasn't an albino, he just went beautifully grey while still a youngster. And tradition has it that of all the Cravens these white-haired lads were invariably the choicest dare-devils of the whole unruly gang."

"But why Badger?" persisted Enid.

"Oh, that's just the country people. An ordinary badger is a tough proposition, and if you get one that is hoary with sin and accumulated experience, well, he beats the band, I suppose. As an effort at christening it's not very ingenuous, I admit, but there it is."

"So the last White Badger is maintaining the family tradition in the divorce court," she remarked caustically.

"Oh, no, he isn't," contradicted Coddington. "Fair play! I don't suspect him of a tendency to monkish celibacy, but that affair was a casual fluke in his career. He's been in the Air Force; he's been in the Secret Service; and rumour has it that he saw some of the unofficial scrapping that has gone on in Tibet in recent years—British influence versus Chinese, you know, or perhaps you don't. In addition, he's trekked round Africa a lot—much more than I have. Following that, he's gone on the Stock Exchange, I hear. Probably trying his hand at skinning Jew and Gentile; a queer move that, a sort of eagle's descent upon the vultures."

"But why ever should such a man buy our paper?" she asked in perplexity.

"Ask me something easy," suggested Coddington. "Perhaps he didn't. He may have tossed old Felix Rowley quits or double over a bet on the Grand National and won. One thing is certain," he added hopefully, "that, now he has got it, you people are in for a lively time. I should get the last issue of *Old Moore's Almanac* if I were you and see what it's likely to be. Look under the heading, 'Whirlwind and Cataclysm.'"

"To come back to facts," she said dryly. "What

am I to do about this interview with you for our paper?"

"I object to the interview," Coddington decided briskly. "A signed article of 1,500 words at £10 10s. is the ticket. You write it, going steady on the sob-stuff and satiric touches; I'll sign it and you can draw the 'brass.' I won't be bothered with it. How's that suit you?"

"Oh, I couldn't," she expostulated, "it would be positively dishonest; I should be getting paid twice for one piece of work—I've a standing salary, you know."

"Getting paid twice!" he guffawed. "That's not being dishonest. That's moving with the times."

At this point Aunt Lou returned and proceeded to rescue Enid.

"He'll talk your head off, my dear," she remarked, and forthwith burst into full verbal eruption.

CHAPTER THREE

HIGH FINANCE

THE gale which had harried Enid Petersham and lent such spectacular danger to the stranding of the German tramp steamer had also caused the grossest discomfort to passengers on the cross-Channel air service. Among these was Rupert Hastings. As far as he could judge, he was sicker than everyone else; in fact, he was quite certain that no one had ever been so bad before, and heartily cursed the whole brood of inventors who had produced aeroplanes, and himself, especially, for being such a fool as to embark in one.

The intensity of his disgust was, however, partly due to the fact that he had not wanted to leave Paris. Having done all that had been asked of him, he had confidently anticipated a few days of quiet dissipation before returning to London, and then, unexpectedly, unreasonably it seemed to him, there had come Blantyre's urgent instructions to hurry back. Blantyre had even fixed one of their furtive meetings—9.30 p.m. in the private room at the back of Blantyre's block of offices. "Come by the private entrance as usual," he had written, "and be careful no one sees you." It had been most annoying, and the Channel crossing had been —well, much more than the finishing touch. Still, Blantyre paid well, and Hastings consoled himself by estimating the probable amount that Blantyre would slip across to him, and with the thought that Blantyre's further need of him would assuredly spell yet more money. He could do with it.

Rupert Hastings relied for a living mainly upon

the fact that he was a good mixer. True, he started with distinct advantages: he was well connected, he had the entrée to influential circles in both Paris and London, he was good-looking and of excellent address. But allowing for all this, it must be admitted he had a flair for getting everywhere, meeting everyone worth meeting, and finding out what was what. Such a man, provided he had no delicate scruples, could glean much information that was of the greatest cash value to those astute gentlemen—the word is a courtesy title—who call themselves financiers. Hastings had no delicate scruples, and Blantyre was a financier. That exactly explains their relations. Socially, Hastings did not know Blantyre—all other considerations apart, it would have spoilt the game.

Promptly at 9.30 he threaded his way through the narrow thoroughfare that led to the back of Blantyre's premises, opened the private door and quietly made his way up the dimly lighted stone stairs. He tapped lightly with his knuckles on a heavy mahogany door, and a booming voice bade him enter.

The room in no wise resembled an office; it was furnished with all the comfort of the living-room of a luxury flat—a rich carpet, deep chairs, delicate lighting. A faint waft of heady perfume hung in the air. "The satyr! " thought Hastings. "There's another girl been here." But outwardly his greeting to Blantyre was convential enough and perfectly polite.

"You look a bit peaked," remarked Blantyre. "Had a bad crossing? "

"Don't remind me of it," begged Hastings.

"You'd better have a brandy," advised Blantyre. "Nothing like cognac to settle the stomach."

"No, thanks," declared Hastings, with a shudder. "I've had three and they've done all that brandy can do. Only time can do the rest. But you needn't worry about me, thanks. I think my wits are all right to talk business."

"That's something," growled Blantyre, and settled back in his chair, from which he had half risen when he suggested producing brandy.

He was a dark man in the early forties, handsome in a sullen sort of way, and had a look of extreme worldly wisdom. His figure was good, even athletic, and he looked thoroughly fit, except for a slight puffiness beneath the eyes that hinted of dissipation.

Hastings slumped down in a lounge chair opposite to him. His narrow, handsome face was every whit as keen and sophisticated as Blantyre's.

"Well," began Blantyre, "to come to business. You didn't do badly in Paris. I got those French bonds marketed at the best price that has ruled this last six months, thanks to your tip; and I've started a quiet selling of those blocks of French industrials. I'll soon have everything liquidated and in hard cash." He drew a bulky envelope out of his breast-pocket as he spoke and pitched it across to Hastings. "£200 in one-pound notes," he remarked.

"Thanks," said Hastings laconically, and pocketed the wad as though it meant nothing to him.

"I shall be glad to get my funds back here," resumed Blantyre. "Taking my money over to France before we went off the gold standard and bringing it back now means a darned good profit; but to do it I've had to shelve a very promising speculation. It's beginning to worry me a little, and that's where you come in."

Hastings slewed his languid body round a little, the more nearly to face Blantyre, and his narrow-set eyes fastened themselves intently upon his host. Clearly, as he had said, his wits were all right to consider business.

"This is all new to you, so I'll start from the beginning," went on Blantyre. "Now, I've a moderate holding in Ngamya Goldfields Ltd., and how I came by it is an interesting story. Do you know Trevor Craven?"

"Phyllis Cotton!" murmured Hastings. "Yes, I

know him; but only to say good day to. Don't like him. Too good an opinion of himself. Go on."

"He came to me," said Blantyre, "about twelve months ago with a proposition that we should secure control of Ngamya Goldfields Ltd. Having been himself on their actual concessions—he had just come back from Africa—he was convinced they were a magnificent investment, and that the holding company was a set of ignoramuses who did not know what they had got and would be only too willing to sell out."

"So you bought," remarked Hastings tritely.

"Wait a bit," said Blantyre. "I agreed to buy with Craven, to buy enough to get control, if possible to buy the whole issue, but an unfortunate thing occurred. The news leaked out—so it seemed—and six other people got in before us. I got a moderate holding, Craven did better, certainly; but together we were far behind the other six."

"Very unfortunate," sighed Hastings—there was, however, a hint of cautious reservation in his tone; he knew Blantyre.

"Yes," agreed Blantyre, "it was, especially for Craven, for, you see, I know those six other fellows and he doesn't. They'll let me have those shares when I want them."

"I see," drawled Hastings. "How damnably unfortunate for him. And what does he think about the way things panned out?"

"What can he think?" countered Blantyre. "It happened just as I've told you, and the fact that the other six are business friends of mine has nothing to do with the matter; it doesn't come into the picture."

"Not yet," remarked Hastings sardonically.

Blantyre grinned. "Business is business," he said. "I don't think," he went on unblushingly, "that he suspected anything; but the failure of our joint enterprise has had the effect of making him hunt on his own. That is to say, he is financing his own stunts—he has

a kind of expert partner and henchman—a Jew named Silverman, telegraphic address 'Sinaiticus, Throgmorton'—a bit brazen, that. Evidently doesn't think much of the Codex we've purchased from the Bolshies. Well, at the present moment these two—I'm fairly sure it's them—are busy broadcasting information as to the current disgraceful management of Ngamya Goldfields. If they can frighten holders of the stock into selling, Craven will pick up the shares he and I—er—missed. It's perfectly clear he does not suspect me, for, if he knew I had the other shareholders in my pocket, he would never attempt to stampede them."

Hastings was secretly amused by the careless cynicism with which Blantyre rapidly shed all pretence that he had not double-crossed Craven.

"I suppose," he said, "you want me to find out for certain if it is Craven who is running the company down, and just what he is up to."

"Yes," agreed Blantyre, "but that's not all. There's something that's even more important. Naturally, the worst thing that could happen for me is for some news to send up the price of the shares before I take them over. In that case the holders might not want to loose them, whereas now they are rather scared of them, for they are only half paid up. One of the six tackled me about it the other day, and I definitely promised to relieve him of them soon. 'But subbose, Mister Blantyre,' he said—he's a Jew—'subbose you vas to die, dese shares vud be in my name and dey are only hav paid up—ten schillings to pay on each share.' He was sweating at the thought," concluded Blantyre with a laugh.

"What could send up the price?" asked Hastings pertinently, harking back to Blantyre's point.

"A Government White Paper," Blantyre told him. "About three years ago a geological expert, named Coddington, was sent out, and made a thorough survey of all that region. For some reason the report was never published; but recently, since this country went

off the gold standard and the price of gold and the value of gold-mining shares went up, there has been a growing agitation for the publication of this report. People want to gauge the prospects and potential value of the various companies. Unfortunately—I've only heard this, mind you—a certain statesman of note had the report unearthed from the archives of Whitehall and took it away for careful consideration. The report disappeared."

Hastings' eyebrows went up in mock astonishment.

"Truly unfortunate," he said. "And this is, too, the second unfortunate incident in your story. Unfortunate for others, I mean; you're all right; the ill wind turns your mill. I suppose you are quite certain it has gone?" he asked with suave irony.

"Yes," said Blantyre, with a chuckle that spoke volumes, "perfectly sure; but all the same I'm not out of the wood, for Coddington may have preserved a carbon copy of his report, or the Government may have him rewrite it. Then they can publish, if they want to, or if, as seems likely, there is such a public outcry that their hands are forced. I don't expect the worst; but to be forewarned is to be forearmed, so I want you to find out whether Whitehall has any prospect of replacing the lost copy. The hubbub over the loss must have penetrated to every club in town, and you should pick up the required information among smoke-room gossips, without anyone having the least suspicion that you are hunting for it."

"Maybe," said Hastings, in non-committal tone. "Anyhow, I'll do my best. It comes to this, then; you want me to see what Craven's up to, find out what Whitehall is doing about the unfortunate disappearance of its report and, especially, to keep an eye on Coddington, in case he is able to produce another copy of this all-important document."

"You've got it exactly," said Blantyre, in a gratified voice. "See me through this and you won't be the

loser. If the whole thing will hang fire for a week or two, till I can realize and bring back funds from France, then the apples will fall into my lap. And, as I say, you shall have some. By the by, this job will probably involve you in some expense, running around and entertaining. Would you like an advance for expenses, say £100?"

"Suit me nicely, thanks," said Hastings, and pocketed this second wad that Blantyre so obligingly produced.

By this time his zest for business had made him forget his stomach qualms, and he felt so much recovered that he consented to have a drink. The conversation became inconsequential.

"How are you getting along with motor-boating?" he asked Blantyre, among other things.

"Haven't done much lately—been too busy; but what little I've done I've enjoyed immensely. I'm working the boat—the *Corsair*, you remember—I'm working her from harbour to harbour along the south coast. When I get her to Texemouth, I'll keep her there for a spell. Texemouth is a grand place for a quiet, discreet week-end. I wish I could ask you down, you'd enjoy it."

"Thanks," said Hastings, "but it wouldn't do. I'm a creature in the background of the tale, and you must not tempt me out."

Although their conversation had thus drifted away from the main topic of the night's business, both had evidently continued to think about it. Just before he left, Hastings inquired:

"If there should prove to be another copy of this report, I suppose it had better disappear? The loss will again be unfortunate, but timely."

"Yes," agreed Blantyre with a laugh, "provided it disappears quietly. And that reminds me. I intended to warn you not to forget that, before or behind you, there may be a rival for information about the report. You'll

have to be especially wary not to arouse suspicion or, in conjunction with Craven, you may give the game away. He is just as interested as we are to know whether there is a report going to be published. He'll be making inquiries, too—if he has not already done so."

"I'll look out for Craven," said Hastings, and departed as unobtrusively as he had come.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE NEW PROPRIETOR

The Woman's Sphere was published every week. Many unthinking people doubtless assumed, on no basis of fact, that it was the product of one of those monstrous modern combines that pour out a shoal of diverse publications from one address—all out of the same tub, like the various lines of the traditional butter merchant. In reality it was nothing of the sort, its genesis was solitary and uncrowded, and that was the probable reason why the paper preserved such a fresh, individual character and maintained its very satisfactory sales.

Old Felix Rowley had founded and for many years run it himself, except for very subordinate help. Certainly he relaxed as time went on, but nominally to the end he had been editor, business manager and chief journalist with all the strings in his own hand. This evolution explained the undefined nature of Enid Petersham's very satisfactory post with the paper. After coming down from Oxford she had spent one term teaching in a girl's high school; but unfortunately—or fortunately—the staff was old, and she was quite unable to endure the atmosphere of dessicated altruism which her colleagues had cultivated to fill up the vacuum of their stifled emotions and empty lives. Having that invaluable possession, a slight but adequate competence, she threw up the post in that cloistered academy and tried her luck in the boisterous world outside. She found she very much preferred it. Old

Felix gave her a small post; at the end of twelve months the senior woman of the staff left to get married and Enid was promoted. That had been four years ago; she was now twenty-six; earned £500 a year and was unofficially, but actually, editress of the paper.

Similarly, from small beginnings Tubby Burton had, under the eye of Felix, come to supervise the business side of the paper. He was corpulent, bald, forty-five and married with four children. The scope of his authority had never been precisely laid down; but he and Enid never quarrelled; they very seldom disagreed; he managed, she edited. This had already been the case for some time during the last days of Felix's relaxed regime. When he departed without warning, things went on as usual, except that, somewhere in the background, was the new proprietor, whom only Tubby had seen officially, and that for a few hours crammed with business. From Enid down to the office boy they had all, however, heard of Trevor Craven.

The offices of the paper were in a charming eighteenth-century house in Mayfair, within a stone's throw of the Green Park. On the ground floor was the general office, where the assistants worked; a small portion—vulgarly known as "the cattle pen"—was partitioned off by a glass screen for the reception of callers; on the first floor Tubby and Enid had their own rooms; the second floor was let out to outsiders as three small offices.

About eleven o'clock on the third morning after Enid's return from interviewing Coddington, the assistants were interested by the appearance of a tall, distinguished stranger in "the cattle pen." He was quietly, but immaculately, dressed; bowler, grey overcoat, tie, collar, gloves were perfect. The head typist patted her rebellious fair hair into place as she opened the inquiry window. She decided as she did so that it was a pity he did not wear a monocle, as he could so certainly have carried it off. When he raised his hat

she saw a head of sleek white hair. Two quizzical eyes smiled at her and a charming voice said:

"I'm Trevor Craven. Is Mr. Burton at liberty?"

She explained afterwards to the office that she could have dropped. She restrained this tendency, however, and, having gulped hard, informed him that Mr. Burton had just gone out, but that Miss Petersham was in, if she would do.

Craven reflected a moment. "Yes," he decided, "I must get hold of Mr. Burton, but I'll see Miss Petersham while I'm here. Perhaps she can tell me when he will be in."

The girl hurried upstairs to inform Enid, and then returned and piloted Craven to the room.

"Mr. Craven," she announced demurely, and hurried downstairs to put an end with her news to the work of the general office.

"Good morning," said Craven, and shook hands with unruffled calm. The door clicked to behind the departing girl and he smiled. "Dear me! The lady of the cliffs! What an unexpected pleasure. But I think you might have told me the other day, instead of leaving me to wonder whether I should ever see you again."

Enid tried to look prim, but was afraid she did not quite succeed.

"I didn't know you, Mr. Craven, at the time. It wasn't till you had gone that I heard your name and connected you up. But sit down, will you?"

"Thanks. So you connected me up," he remarked dryly, as he dropped his hat and gloves on to one chair and seated himself in another. "Nothing like being well known."

Enid wondered whether she stood condemned as having "dropped a brick," and turned the conversation to fresh ground.

"Were you all right after that soaking you got the other day?"

"Oh, quite, thanks. Neither cold nor wet hurts me if I keep going till I can get a rub down and a change. If I don't, it's another matter. Not that it's much to grumble at. Really I'm very lucky. Few people knock about much in the East without picking up something or other that's liable to come back on them if they provoke it. A mild recurrence of ague is a bagatelle. By the by, it has just occurred to me, what took you down near my place? You were going to interview Coddington as I suggested to Burton?"

"Yes," she agreed. "I went straight on and saw him after you left."

"That largely explains the coincidence and makes it less surprising. Coincidences always startle me, and in cold print in a book I can't tolerate them. As a kid at prep. I remember getting an awful wigging from the English Lit. man for scorning 'A Tale of Two Cities' on that account—it reeks of coincidence. Rather absurd of me, for you get more amazing coincidences in life than in any books. Now I remember . . ." and he proceeded to entertain Enid with a run of capitally told anecdote gathered on his wanderings in Europe and the East.

Her prejudices were lulled; Coddington's jocular warnings were forgotten; she did not even remember the decorum proper to an editress in the presence of the proprietor, she accepted his cigarettes and smoked in office hours.

Eventually the conversation came full circle to her interview with Coddington, and she produced the article she had written and which the immoral Coddington had signed before she left his noisy roof.

A strange reluctance suddenly possessed Craven. "No, I don't think we'll bother with that chap after all. I'm still keen on the idea of running such a series, but we must get really interesting people."

"As you like," she agreed in rather a flat voice, "but I wish you'd look at it to see if I've managed to

hit the type of thing you had in mind when you were talking to Tu—Mr. Burton."

In face of her obvious disappointment he had to read it. He did so seriously.

"A 1.," was his verdict. "In fact, it's worked up better than I expected. We'll maybe publish it after all, unless some of your own articles quite eclipse it."

This remark was leading to dangerous ground, so she hurried the conversation on.

"Thanks; I'm glad I gauged your requirements. I got as many concrete points introduced as possible; but people tend to vague, woolly generalities by a sort of natural instinct, and either can't or won't produce hard facts. Take the copy of that Government report: Coddington wouldn't have produced it, he said, but in any case he couldn't, for he'd actually used the blank backs of the pages to take carbon copies of one of his thrillers and it had long since disappeared. So that even I don't know the look of a geologist's Government report. Our readers won't get definite information on that."

"Doesn't matter at all," he broke in hastily, "most of the points I mentioned were merely given as illustrations of what I thought should go into a good article or interview. Please don't think for a minute I was trying to tell you how to do your job, I was merely explaining my own idea so that you could try it out."

Could mollification go further than this? Enid glowed and responded with a hearty lie.

"Oh, I never suspected for one minute that you were trying to . . . to . . ." For some absurd reason she could not find words to finish.

He laughed. "You mustn't say to teach your grandmother to suck eggs, for the metaphor would be most frightfully ill-chosen." And again there swept over his face the puckish, devil-may-care, schoolboy look that had so transformed him for a moment on the cliffs.

Enid resolutely gave him glance for glance. "If I

used such hackneyed expressions, I should expect as a journalist to be sacked by my employer."

He accepted the thrust with perfect good humour.

"I asked for it," he remarked. "Now, out of the list of people I suggested," he went on, "whom do you suggest tackling next? I forget all I put down, but certainly remember the King's Proctor, a wholesale ice cream manufacturer, and a designer of jackets for new novels. The last chap ought to be interesting; I've often wondered whether he has to read the whole book and select his own incident to illustrate, or whether the publisher puts him on to a hectic patch straightway and says, 'Stagger humanity with a picture of this.'"

"You're not serious," expostulated Enid.

"Oh, yes, I am," he insisted, "you dig out the list."

When she produced it he perplexed her by wading through the whole thing with the utmost gravity.

After considerable discussion, they decided on the captain of a cargo liner trading between London and the East. Enid was quite eager to tackle the business unaided; but Craven said he could easily fix up the whole affair through the director of a shipping firm who was a member of his club, and so save her a great deal of trouble.

At this point heavy footsteps passed along the corridor, and the door of the next room was opened and then closed with a bang.

"That's Mr. Burton," Enid said.

Craven decided he had better catch him before lunch hour claimed both of them, and so, promising to let her know when he had arranged for her next interview, betook himself next door.

She spent the rest of her time before going out to lunch in an attempt to sort out her impressions of her employer. Some points, such as his bravery, were obvious. That he possessed a sense of humour was equally certain, though she expected on further acquaintance to discover that it was perverted. His

intelligence and knowledge of the world were, too, quite beyond question, likewise his charm. As the latter had been directed towards herself as a member of the opposite sex, she decided it was to be tested with the greatest caution, especially as his history included the episode of Phyllis Cotton. His motives or purpose in buying *The Woman's Sphere*, apparently at a moment's notice, were an inscrutable mystery.

What he thought of herself either as woman or editress she could make no guess; but, as she put on her hat to go out to lunch, she noted with satisfaction that she was not looking too bad that morning.

Craven turned up without warning two days later at ten in the morning, having, so he said, put the matter through much more quickly than he expected. One could not, he explained, descend upon a ship's captain just as he had entered or was about to leave port, for then he was bound to be busy. One had to catch him aboard while the ship was unloading. Opportunities to do this were not very frequent. However, Captain Towers, of the S.S. *Malabar*, had to be aboard that morning, and would see her at 11 a.m. prompt. The owners had sent round word to this effect, and also a permit that would get her past all dock and harbour officials without quibble. To ease matters still further, Craven sent her in his Rolls.

"It's vulgar snobbery to say so," he remarked, "but if you are in a Rolls nobody will query you—unless you go slumming."

For a moment Enid had feared he intended to go with her. Had he offered to do so she would hardly have known how to treat the advance, and she would certainly have felt embarrassed when interviewing the captain. Craven did nothing of the sort. He hurried her off with casual banter, and told her not to worry about getting back as he had no need of the car till evening.

She had a most interesting time. The captain was

a voluble, cheery man of fifty; his figure resembled the bole of a stumpy oak tree. Until Enid's arrival he had regarded this whim of his employers to let journalists loose on him as a damn nuisance, an imposition that cried to heaven. Couldn't a man call his soul his own when in port? But as soon as he saw Enid the years fell from him.

He took her all over the ship, explained everything to her and showed her the main items of cargo that were being unloaded—hemp, jute, tea, spices, some foreign woods of great value, and a consignment of cheap manufactured trash from Japan. About the last item he had some strong things to say. All the time he was solicitude itself, and seemed to labour under the fear that she was some *objet d'art* that might easily be injured irremediably, or soiled beyond help of soap and water, during the tour of the ship. To all her questions on subjects maritime, he poured out a flood of information and regaled her with a store of personal experiences that made Conrad's stories seem very small beer, apart from the literary quality of their style.

His great regret was that he could not put on lunch for her—the steward was ashore and the galley cold. Enid thanked him and suggested, if he could spare the time, that he should lunch with her in the city.

He gave two rapid blinks and then accepted with alacrity. His wife and dinner would be waiting at home; but after all, he reflected, it was part of his duty to his owners to talk to this girl—evidently she was backed by the powers that be. In these hard times a man must keep on the right side of them and not be too independent. He did not like keeping his wife waiting, but it had to be done.

Lunch was a great success, and the article that Enid wrote that evening struck her as one of her best efforts.

Craven came into the office late the next afternoon to see Burton, though he had made no appointment to

ensure his being in. Burton was out, so, without any especial disappointment, Craven gravitated to Enid's room. His interest in the publishing business was obviously growing apace. He asked her how she had got on the previous morning, read her article and liked it hugely. It read much better, he said, than the stuff that chap Coddington had written up. In future she had better do the stuff herself rather than accept articles from people who might have a lot to say, but couldn't get it into decent shape.

After this he naturally passed to the recurring question of whom next she should interview. She made several suggestions, which he queried, and twenty minutes' discussion only seemed to reveal a more and more marked difference of opinion. Craven looked at the clock on Enid's desk. The time was four o'clock.

"I don't want to be rude," he apologized, "but this is a dry job. All the same, I'd like to get it settled. Couldn't we pop out into one of the teashops and settle it there? Tea might brighten my ideas."

How could anyone refuse? In fifteen minutes they were beneath the shade of the sheltering palm in a quiet nook of Cortino's restaurant. They agreed on China tea and cakes.

"Of the tea, let there be plenty," Craven insisted to the waitress. "I don't know," he continued to Enid, "that I prefer its flavour to Indian, but it seems to invite you to drink a lot and that suits me. I always was a thirsty soul."

A man leaving the café exchanged nods with Craven.

"Fellow I was at Oxford with," he explained.

"Oh, were you there? I was, too."

They discussed Oxford. The talk wandered to what they had done after going down. She told him about the high school for girls and its staff.

"Poor old things," was his comment. "Life had passed them by. Can't imagine you there. You wouldn't fit at all."

"Why not?" she demanded.

His glance loitered over her dark eyes and dusky beauty, which might have been Eastern except for her rich colouring and eager vitality. There was nothing languorous about her, he decided.

"If I were to tell you," he said, "you'd snub me."

"Risk it," she chaffed him; but he shook his head. "Well, where do you think I should fit in?" she asked. "Tell me that."

He pondered a moment. "Galloping a horse bare-headed over the downs, or riding a surf-board on a freshening sea. You'd do quite well, too, in an old palace I once saw in the foothills of the Himalayas. There was a barbaric throne there, absolutely plated with gold, in a place they called the Hall of a Thousand Lamps. Properly decked out you'd look well sitting on it—that's if you let your hair grow long. The lights would shine on your ey——"

Enid quickly passed him the cakes; with a grin he selected an éclair.

After that he proceeded to tell her seriously of his experiences in India and more particularly in Tibet. His talk was quite general, and he never betrayed why he had been there, nor precisely what he had done. He had, however, the power of very vivid description, and made her realize the awful mystery of the storm-swept peaks and mountain passes of the frontier region, and the bleak, arid spaciousness of the strange land they guarded. He told her of the vividly beautiful flowers found there flaunting their beauty, often against the whiteness of the lifeless snow. He described the people who went unwashed because water was a rarity and fuel too precious to use for thawing snow.

Enid sat engrossed, until he remarked that he had a rather wonderful collection of photographs in his flat, and she must come round to see them sometime. This gave her a jolt. She thanked him politely, but her unspoken decision was, "Not for this child." The next

moment, however, she thought she detected a glint of amusement in his eye, and immediately wondered whether he was amusing himself by making her scent danger where none existed. Yes, his sense of humour was probably perverted, as she had feared.

"Beyond the photos," he continued, "I brought little away with me—you couldn't transport anything except necessities. This is one of my few souvenirs," and he pulled a quaintly fashioned gold ring from off the little finger of his left hand. It was barely half an inch across—he had very slender fingers—and was quite plain except that its surface was covered with tiny hammered marks which seemed like a multitude of facets. They all appeared similar, but there must have been some variation for they contrived to suggest a wreathed pattern wound spiral-wise round the ring. "I found the nugget myself, poked it out of the quartz with my knife, a lump of pure gold. A Tibetan hammered the ring out for me while I watched him, partly from interest and also to see that he did not bolt. Rather artistic in its quaint way, I think."

She agreed, examining it closely. She tried it on the fingers of her right hand; it just fitted her third finger.

"It is interesting to have something with a real history you can vouch for," she remarked, handing it back, "and also something unique that no one else can go into a shop and buy."

The business they had gone into the café to discuss never recurred to Craven until they were leaving. He was strangely forgetful for an intelligent man.

Enid noted this forgetfulness and decided that, if in the near future any further effort were made to follow such unbusinesslike methods, she should most emphatically be busy, much too busy to go out. She was so puzzled by Craven that she intended to be very cautious.

But for the next few days Craven was little in

evidence; then, the day they went to press, when she was always devil-driven with work, he surprised her relaxing at last over tea brewed in the office. Of course she had to share it with him.

By this time his interest in his new venture had presumably become known, and people began to ring him up at the publishing office. One or two had even called and asked to see him. But this had passed almost unnoticed until one Friday morning, when, about 10.30, two irate and apoplectic-looking city men burst into the office, trailing at their heels a solicitor who resembled a weasel soured by dyspepsia.

They asked for Mr. Craven in no uncertain terms, and were eventually shown up to the small room he had taken as his. On the part of the visitors the visit was, at its beginning, very stormy; the noise penetrated to Enid's room, where the shouting was clearly audible for a few moments. Then silence fell, and a little later the three departed with a bleak, quenched expression on their faces. Their feelings had evidently been still further hurt.

After perhaps five minutes Craven tapped at Enid's door and, receiving permission to enter, settled himself in the chair now thoroughly familiar to him.

His eyebrows were cocked in a whimsical manner which she had already learnt was his nearest approach to an expression of annoyance.

"I apologize for the noise; I suppose you must have heard it?" he said.

Enid nodded. This was a very mild expression of agreement, for the initial storm had suggested that someone was about to be lynched.

"A regular deluge of blasphemy," continued Craven. "I'm rather afraid that poor old Felix has been doing what he didn't ought as far as our two friends are concerned. They were very annoyed that he had sold out and sloped—that was their inelegant expression. At first they were inclined to blame me."

"Why! What has he done?" demanded Enid, trying not to appear too obviously interested.

"That's not very clear. They were rather excited, you know, and for that matter did not stay very long. I gather it is all a matter of high finance, in which Felix has dabbled not wisely but too well. Whether he has got their money or they want to get his is rather doubtful; but they seemed quite sure that if he had not got away they would have been able to lay their hands on something substantial, perhaps this *Woman's Sphere* of ours—I suppose it was his chief asset."

Craven lit a cigarette and blew a meditative smoke ring.

"It doesn't surprise me altogether. I thought at the time the old chap had rather a hurried look in his eye when he asked me if I'd care to buy him out. It obviously wasn't the time to worry him with questions, so I paid him the figure he asked and took over. Felix was a very good friend to me once," he added parenthetically.

"This juggling with money is a queer game," he continued, as Enid said nothing. "I suppose it's something like roulette in a rough house, the stakes get high, the crowd thickens, excitement mounts till everyone is boiling over. Then, of course, things happen. Somebody slips away with another person's wad to try his luck; the due winnings somehow get into the wrong pockets; the balloon goes up, as it did here this morning.

"But, of course, it's nothing to do with me and, as I told them, beyond hoping that old Felix is perfectly safe and comfortable somewhere, I haven't the slightest interest in the affair.

"You're not very busy, are you?" he suddenly demanded, apparently with the utmost inconsequence. "No, you can't be," he decided before she could reply. "You went to press yesterday. Well, let's go out; I feel peeved; the place needs to be left to ventilate after that visit."

"Go where?" she inquired weakly, taken unawares by this whirlwind request.

"Oh, anywhere. A run into the country. You've never been out with me yet, and there's no earthly reason why you shouldn't." He made this statement in a tone of aggressive determination.

Enid remembered one or two pieces of business that she must attend to. He suggested that she should issue the necessary instructions while he phoned for his car and, taking her consent for granted, left the room to do so.

In fifteen minutes they had glided over Chelsea Bridge and the car was gathering speed, headed apparently in the direction of Croydon.

CHAPTER FIVE

A FLIP

WHEN they had left the worst of the traffic behind and the driving was easy, Enid ventured to talk to Craven.

"Where are we going?" she asked. "Have you made up your mind?"

"While you were getting ready it came into my head that we might try the coast. Pleasant change."

"The coast!" she echoed in astonishment. "That's a long run: surely there won't be time. It's nearly twelve now."

"Heaps," he assured her laconically, his eyes steadily fixed on the road ahead. "Anyhow, what's time? We're not in a hurry."

This struck Enid as somewhat equivocal. Men, she knew, were very haphazard in their planning, and were prone to set off for some wild destination with only the haziest notion of what time they could get back. This genuine habit could be productive of much embarrassment; but the trouble was that some members of the sex were not quite so guileless in their casual ordering of affairs as they liked girls to think. She glanced up at Craven; but his face wore merely a look of innocent enjoyment. He might be an inconsequential male bent solely on an outing; but she could not be sure.

"It's about a hundred miles there and back to Brighton, the nearest point," she informed him, "and"—this came somewhat tartly—"I hadn't imagined that its exotic beauty would draw you that way."

"No," he admitted, "I hadn't thought of going to

Brighton. We'll go south-west, farther along the coast to Texemouth. It's a wonderful little spot, well known to yachtsmen and motor-boat people. Not so far from my own place."

Enid stiffened. The immediate future seemed to hold possibilities that had not occurred to her, at any-rate, that morning. When would they get back?

Craven evidently noticed her tenseness. "We'll go by air," he told her, "from Croydon. That will give us plenty of time." There was a hint of laughter in his voice that belied its soothing quality.

"By air! " she cried. "I've never been up in my life."

"You haven't! " His surprise was genuine. "All the better," he affirmed. "Nothing like a fresh experience for stirring the blood. You'll love it. By the by, are you a good sailor? "

"Fair. Why? " Her lapse into curt monosyllables was due to the suspicion that he was secretly laughing at her. She did not intend to submit tamely.

"I was only wondering whether you were likely to be sick," was his cheering explanation.

"You're a beast," she told him. "I won't go."

"Dear, dear," he lamented, "I thought you were a strong-minded young female whom nothing could daunt. And you won't face up to an odd chance like that. I'll lay you 100 to 1 in shillings that you are all right."

"The bet's not worth winning," she declared. "Think of my sufferings to get it, and the blow to my self-respect at giving an exhibition. Besides, it would probably cost me the fiver recuperating on best cognac and chicken broth. No, we'll call it off," she decided.

"I'll throw the cognac and chicken broth in too," he offered. "You shall convalesce at the best hotel in Texemouth for as long as is necessary. And the best hotel in Texemouth," he added, "is really very good indeed. You'd like it."

"It sounds riskier than flying," she remarked. "No, we'll go for a nice drive in the country, you shall pay for my tea at a Y.W.C.A.—where they won't let you in—and afterwards we'll drive back home early before twilight falls and the owls begin to hoot."

"I'm a quiet man," he told her, "I couldn't stand the excitement of racing back against time to beat the owls. We'll have to go on. Perhaps you will feel better able to face it after we've had lunch at Croydon."

They had not much time to spare, but the light meal they secured was excellent, and certainly all Enid's protestations died away. At the sight of the aeroplane waiting for them on the wide flying-ground she was too interested to indulge in either pretence or persiflage. A new experience was irresistible and her eyes sparkled in anticipation. Craven smiled quietly as he observed her.

The machine was a small, fast monoplane, with its cockpit and diminutive cabin enclosed, and at all points beautifully streamlined. Of this exact machine Southern Airways Ltd. possessed only two, which they had bought and put into experimental service as aerial taxis for individual charter. The demand for the service of such machines could never be great, nor could the service be cheap; but the company thought there might be sufficiently wealthy men in a hurry to make the running pay over a period. Their maximum speed was 150 m.p.h., and their radius 500 miles.

They got aboard and Craven gave the pilot detailed instructions where he was to land at Texemouth; at a signal from the pilot a mechanic swung the propellor; the engine roared and then slowed; the chocks under the wheels were removed, the plane taxied into the wind and then seemed to burst into life.

To Craven there was nothing new in this; indeed it was tame compared with some of his own experiences; his dominant feeling was a deep longing to be seated in the cockpit himself, flying once more.

But Enid eagerly savoured each phase of this fresh and wildly exciting experience. The machine vibrated, the engine roared, the wind screamed, the ground streaked by at a madly increasing speed. Half the jolting disappeared; the tail had lifted: all the jolting had gone; the plane was in the air. It rose in a long, steady slant, blocks of fields, entire residential estates seemed to be peeled away beneath her until, the plane having reached a height of about 1,000 feet, the speed seemed to drop to a very unremarkable level. The country, spread out like a map, glided leisurely away far below, and only the roar of the engine and the shriek of the wind suggested that they were travelling at high speed.

She had expected to be dizzy; but, as with most people, the novelty of her point of view made the whole prospect seem unreal; she knew it was the earth that slid away so surely and so far below, but she could not realize the fact. She felt isolated and withdrawn; she simply could not be dizzy.

Suddenly she remembered her companion and brought her attention back to the cabin in which she sat. Craven was amusedly watching her enthralled, eager face.

"Like it?" he asked.

"Gorgeous!" she answered. "I could go on for ever."

"We must remember the time," he reminded her maliciously.

She let the remark pass. Conversation was not difficult, thanks to the scientific construction of the cabin walls which blanketed the noise of the engine, but she was too interested to talk.

In front the pilot lolled in his seat, making an occasional slight and lazy movement; he seemed bored. Flying did not seem so very difficult, she thought; apparently you set the machine going and it just went; you scarcely had to touch it.

"Guildford," suddenly announced Craven.

She looked down. Yes, they were crossing the gap in a line of hills. There was the Wey, that silver thread winding carelessly over the green map below. It must be Guildford; but she would not have recognized it had she not been told. That ridge now on the right hand must be the Hog's Back. It looked very insignificant.

Over the Hampshire hills rain-clouds from the Channel had thickened. The pilot rose above them and the machine remained in clear sunshine. There was no earth visible, only a strange expanse of fantastic hills and valleys, varying in colour from grey to pure white, and similar in fluffy texture to the appearance of cotton wool. It was the upper surface of the clouds, a sight she had never seen before. Reflected from this bright floor the sunlight was blindingly bright. Her surroundings were more than ever unreal. Once they passed swiftly over a small gap in the clouds and she had a momentary glimpse of the earth, now looking grey and smudged. It was like being in a child's fairyland and gazing down through a hole in a magical floor on to the world of common things.

By the time they were thoroughly clear of the clouds the far line of the coast was in view and, as they neared it, the waters of the Channel opened out to a vaster expanse of water than she had ever before seen at a glance. It seemed slightly hollow, rounding up gradually to meet the horizon. There was no uniformity in its colour. Here over a wide area it was green, there blue and elsewhere grey. Somewhere or other every imaginable intermediate shade might be found. A streak of brown showed where the water shallowed over a sand-bank; where it joined the land, fine, as though drawn with a pen, was a white streak, surf and breakers when seen close to, but, as Enid saw it, merely a motionless line. Again what she saw was not real; it was drawn in a huge map beneath her feet.

The general novelty of the scene sufficed her and she was not interested to attempt to identify the stretches of coast.

Suddenly the pilot shut off his engine and there was an amazing cessation of noise, that for a moment suggested dead silence. Enid was startled; especially when her hearing adjusted itself and she heard the hissing passage of the plane as it slanted steeply down. Were they falling?

"We've arrived," bawled Craven reassuringly, much more loudly than he need have done with the engine off.

She had never realized their speed, and had been oblivious to the passage of time; she could not believe it. But the plane swooped lower; she saw a quiet harbour, wooded on one side and with a small town huddled on the other. The whole scene seemed rushing up to meet her in terrifying manner. It was the most thrilling moment of the flight. The plane flattened out, swung into the wind and gently swept down to a field between pine woods. For a few seconds the ground raced by at frantic speed, and the machine bumped and swayed. Then they stopped.

"Here you are, sir," remarked the pilot, in the matter-of-fact tones of a conductor who has pulled up a tram.

The whole journey had taken less than an hour.

Craven helped her out of the machine, in which he left his hat and overcoat, for the day was settled and delightfully warm. He exchanged a few words about their return with the pilot, who apparently was quite indifferent when he left, day or night, as the field was good flying-ground.

"I'm going across to the farm to settle with the farmer for landing here. You'll want some grub; I'll ask them to send across. Anything you fancy?"

"Nothing fresh from a farm will come amiss to me, sir," the pilot assured him with thanks.

At the farm Craven charmed the farmer's wife into promising to provide high tea for the man who, by regulations, had to stay with his machine unless properly housed. He insinuated a pound note into her hand to cover his indebtedness. With Enid by his side he turned away across the fields.

"Not everyone would have done that," thought Enid, "no wonder his employees think so highly of him." This reminded her of an anecdote Tubby Burton had gleaned in the City about Craven. She giggled at the half recollection.

"What's the matter?" demanded her companion in surprise.

"Nothing," she told him. "A stray thought."

But her mind insisted on clearly recalling the story. For a short time Craven had been actively interested in another city firm, whose employees had idolized him. "A great chap—pleasure to work for him—a perfect gentleman," some of them had told Tubby. While there, Craven had taken one of the stenographers—a pretty girl—out in his car on business, and by some fluke they were benighted. Craven housed the girl at the only decent hotel, and slept across the road himself at a public-house. "They told me," Tubby had concluded, "that that girl just cried herself to sleep."

Enid enjoyed the thought of Craven's embarrassed perplexity, and wondered how his perverted sense of humour had functioned that night. Despite herself she giggled once more.

"The trip's made you light-headed," suggested Craven, "lean on me if you feel giddy."

She pulled herself together.

The field in which they had landed was part of a clearing that topped the wooded bluff on the eastern side of the little harbour. With only slight hesitation Craven picked up a faint track that led through the trees directly to the cliffs. Only the shortness of the grass that covered it showed it was a path; clearly few

people came that way. The trees were not dense in the sombre way of man-made plantations. They straggled and opened out here and there. Huge lichen-stained rocks, couched deep in brown drifts of last year's leaves and bracken, helped to space them; there were open stretches in which carpets of wild bilberry flourished, and here, too, in the short grasses, harebells swayed their blue and fragile flowers.

Rabbits, pretending panic, scuttled through the undergrowth; there was a chatter and piping of birds in the trees and, ahead from the sea cliffs, came the wailing cry of the gulls—the distance softened the harshness of their call and tempered its mournfulness. To Enid no other sound so perfectly proclaimed the presence of the sea, in whose vastness, even when most bright, she always sensed a veiled sadness and a suggestion of change so infinite that her feverish spark of individuality was tranquillized by being made aware of its own utter insignificance.

She scarcely spoke to her companion, nor had he more to say. For him, too, the smell of the warm earth was a pleasure, and the odorous quiet of the pines an instant delight—instant and fleeting, for in the breeze was the salt promise of the sea, at whose stark edge the green kindliness of the earth has its halting-place and end.

"There's no hurry," he suggested. "Let's stop here a bit."

So they sat in a nook of the rocks on dry bracken, looking through the last of the pines at the dimpled, winking expanse of water and the horizon, that was the limit of their vision but no boundary to the sea. The tall stems and out-thrust branches of the trees were a framework for the sky, and satisfied their eyes by limiting its vastness. And the sky in turn revealed the trees in partial silhouette, so that the unordered beauty of their limbs seemed instinct with life and the hard fineness of their needles the expression of their stubborn strength.

After a time they made the rest of their way to the cliffs and watched the gulls floating beyond the long line of wrack. The sea was calm; it heaved gently, broke up the sunlight into a myriad twinkling gleams, and sought with quiet insistence among the broken rocks and channels of the shore. The cliffs towered up in silence, nursing in their crannies a few basking gulls which called and were answered from the sea. Nothing else stirred.

"This is good," said Craven at length.

"Yes," she agreed. "Fine."

They turned to the right and, again in silence, strolled slowly along the ribbon of short grass that edged the windings of the land.

At the end, where they were on a last finger of cliff, they again sat down. Here they could look back over the harbour once more and clearly trace the outlines of its shape and, on the far side, the huddle of red-roofed cottages and small houses that was Texemouth. "The Old George Hotel" where they were to have tea was thrust out beyond the rest on to the waterfront. Over a lawn, its margin of safety, it looked at the water in tranquil security. The harbour was not so wide as long. Only a few small craft were there, fishermen's boats and pleasure yachts. It was of no importance commercially, but very beautiful.

The jutting promontory, on which Craven and Enid were, curved round to make the harbour sheltered and its entrance narrow. As they sat they could see the steep path that zigzagged down to the water. A ferry, run by a boatman, plied across the mouth from the rough stone pier that jutted from the opposite shore. That is to say, it plied when it was required. At this moment there was not a soul in sight, and all the boats were idly moored.

At a quarter to four Craven looked at his watch.

"Aren't you getting hungry? That lunch at Croydon was rather sketchy."

"I think I am, now you mention it," she admitted. "But I hadn't noticed till now."

"We'll go, then," he decided, and giving her a hand helped her to her feet.

At a leisurely rate they scrambled down the zigzag path, sending small showers of stone ahead of them, and in a few moments reached the beach. Enid crunched across the shingle just ahead of him and reached a large flat rock, an obvious natural landing-place. Craven stepped up behind her.

"What do we do now?" she asked. There was still not a soul in sight at the other side of the ferry.

In an emergency Craven was apt to concentrate straightway upon the situation rather than think round it. He therefore immediately thrust two pairs of fingers into his mouth and whistled with the blasting shrillness of a steam-engine. Enid was so startled that she nearly fell into the sea.

"Was that you?" she cried, one hand clapped to her right ear.

The question was quite unnecessary, for, petrified by dismay, Craven stood there with his offending hands still only half lowered.

"I'm so sorry," he gasped at length. "By Gad, I thought you were going into the sea."

"Thanks very much for trying to catch me," came the retort. "Where did you acquire this inelegant accomplishment? Hampstead Heath on a Bank Holiday?"

"No," he stated contritely. "A butcher's boy taught me when I was young. It took him a long time and I paid him a shilling."

"A dear shilling's worth. This drum's gone, I think," and again she fondled her ear.

"Not really?" he cried. "Let me look down it."

"As though you could see anything. Don't be absurd. Anyway, the man's coming. Thank heaven he didn't think it was a steamer in distress out at sea."

An elderly man had clambered into a small rowing

boat and was now rapidly pulling across the ferry. As he drew alongside the rock there was a look of admiration on his face; but when he had taken in Craven's distinguished figure he looked uncertain.

"Was it you wot whistled, sir?" he asked doubtfully.

"Yes," admitted Craven gravely.

"A very fine effort, sir. A very fine effort indeed, if I may say so. It woke my old woman up, wot reckons to be deaf."

"Quite credible," remarked Enid, "one side of my head is ringing still."

They got into the boat and the man, pulling off, settled again to his long, steady stroke. The boat heaved rhythmically as he laboured, the green water bubbled beneath it, and the objects on the far shore began to grow in size. The distance was only about four hundred yards. As they neared the pier they passed a very smart motor-yacht that lay some thirty yards away in a small, natural cove of the shore. Craven read her name, *Corsair*, and his eyebrows lifted with surprised interest. His tone, however, was quite casual.

"Fine cruiser that," he remarked to the boatman.

"Yes, sir," replied the man, resting on his oars a moment to look at her. "Came in yesterday. She's been here before. Belongs to a London gent, named Blantyre. Two chaps from aboard were in 'The Grey Goat' last night. Might stop here a week or two, they thought, the owner maybe coming down week-ends."

"Good scheme," was Craven's comment.

The man rowed on and brought them to the pier. They scrambled up its worn and slimy steps and made their way along it to the shore. Near the pier was an almost ruined wooden warehouse which was the sole blot on the landscape. From here they had to walk only three hundred yards to "The Old George."

As a preliminary Craven gave the waiter a generous tip, and after that had no difficulty in securing an excellent meal that was unorthodox for the time of day,

but ample recompense for their slight lunch before leaving Croydon.

Craven asked for it to be served in a room he remembered on the first floor. Enid found this to be a charming private apartment with a balcony. Through the window as they sat they had a magnificent view down the harbour to the entrance, above which towered the spur of the enclosing cliff.

Both were hungry; the chicken, salad, wine and minor items were all beyond reproach; their conversation was animated but desultory. She had one moment of embarrassment, for Craven in passing curiosity asked what were the hotel's terms. "Fifteen shillings a day," the waiter said, adding, heaven knows why, the explanation, "each." Enid suddenly became acutely conscious of her conspicuously ringless hands. Did the man imagine her downfall was being planned?

Craven had evidently taken a renewed liking for the spot. After lunch they sat in the sun on the balcony, idly enjoying the scene. He pondered aloud the delights the place offered to the week-end visitor —the comfort of the hotel, a little rambling, a little swimming, a little boating, much basking in the sun.

"What do you think about it?" he asked. "Could anything be better?"

She could hardly say no, for that would be absurd, but felt that open agreement was perhaps indiscreet under the circumstances; so she temporized, but with some lack of caution.

"The place is perhaps too lonely," she suggested.

"Oh, of course. But I didn't mean alone. One could bring a friend."

Whether he was genuinely sly or merely teasing she could not decide, so she took her courage in her hands and stated bluntly that such week-ends were outside her experience.

"Ah! " said Craven with a sigh. This might express sorrow for her or for himself, so she was again left in

doubt as to what was the exact implication of his remarks.

He let the topic drop and talked about motor-boats. She noticed that his eyes had frequently strayed to the motor-yacht beyond the pier. It seemed to have interested him. At last, when he had finished his pipe and she her second cigarette, he asked her what she would like to do. They might, he suggested, walk through the village—it was a picturesque little place—get a boatman at the far end to row them back to where they took the ferry, and then from that point make their way via the cliffs and woods to the landing-field.

She was quite willing. So they loitered through the one narrow street, where Craven bought some cigarettes and a box of chocolates, emerged on the waterfront once more and, after admiring the view of the wooded bluff across the water, found a boatman to row them down. The light was beginning to mellow; to westward the outline of the hills assumed that brief clearness evening so often gives; the whole scene was serene and restful. Even on the water it was warm. The leisurely clopperty-clop of the oars wandered quietly over the expanse; there was scarcely another sound except the cries of some children playing on the shore.

At the flat rock they landed and the boatman took his fare and bade them good night in a tone of gruff independence.

"There's nothing of the lackey about those fellows," remarked Craven. "I like them for it."

The atmosphere of the scene seemed to forbid all hurry, and it was at an even more leisurely pace than the steep path demanded that they clambered up the cliff. Under the level light the colours of the sea had deepened and the aspect of the cliffs seemed sterner, the shadows within their folds and behind their buttresses were darker, more sombre. The woods were still warm and bright with a mellow radiance; but fewer

birds sang, and the hushed stillness among the pines seemed like a brooding expectation.

They sauntered back to the field almost without a word. As they left the last of the wood and the moth-like shape of the plane came into sight, Craven sighed with the content of one who has just savoured to the full a great enjoyment.

"What a relief it is," he remarked, "to get out with someone who understands the blessed nature of silence and does not talk much."

The unexpected compliment made Enid smile; but she suddenly realized that unconsciously she had been in complete agreement with him all the time.

With a roar the aeroplane lifted them into the sky and hurtled them back to London. In the gathering twilight the earth looked merely a drab plain on which there began to show points of light in lines, groups, and larger ordered patterns. Enid felt delightfully tired. The return journey held no new experience for her except the light of the landing-grounds at Croydon. These rushed up to meet them, became a bright, fleeting blur and then stood still.

"Back again, sir," remarked the pilot in his matter-of-fact voice. The trip was over.

They drove back to town and Craven, having expatiated *en route* upon the merits of a quiet restaurant he knew, insisted upon parking the car and taking her there. "Just to round off the day," he explained.

Enid woke up, did full justice to all the restaurant offered, and chattered charmingly for an hour. Then with a sort of fatherly assertiveness he decided to take her home. He pulled up outside her flat in Hampstead at the modest hour of eleven.

"Your reputation's safe," he told her. "I've known people get back later from a prayer-meeting."

"But not in your company," she hazarded.

"Perhaps you're right," he admitted. "Have you got everything?" for she was fumbling for her bag.

"Yes, thanks. It was my bag. I've just found it behind my back."

There was not much light in the street and she could only see the dim loom of his head and face as he leaned sideways away from the wheel towards her. By a sort of sixth sense she became aware that the arm on which he leaned had slid along the top of her seat and so behind her.

"Thanks very much for coming," he said quietly. "I shouldn't have enjoyed it at all by myself; in fact I shouldn't have gone. You've made the day."

"It's been delightful," she told him. "I've never enjoyed a day more in my life. Thank you."

"Not at all. We'll have to go again some day." His hand slid over hers as he spoke and his face came nearer. "Sleep well," she heard him say as his white head bent down. His left arm dropped across her shoulders and he kissed her.

She had known he was going to do so, and she let him.

"Good night," she said simply, as she got out of the car. "Don't you bother to get out. Again, thanks very much."

"Good night," he replied.

She waved to him from the vestibule as she entered. He waved back, pulled the door of the car to, and drove away.

. . . . . .

Enid thrust her slippered feet into the hearth before the electric radiator and sipped a virtuous glass of warm milk. She felt she needed something to let her down a little after the excitement of the day; it was supposed, too, to make one sleep, and there was quite a chance she might lie awake.

For a short trip and a first effort on Craven's part, the outing, she reflected, had not been lacking in thrills. She ran over them again in retrospect, thereby quite counteracting the soporific effects of the milk. No, it

had not been too bad. But Craven was a bigger puzzle than ever; what to think of him she did not know.

The day still held one slight fillip for her. Every evening a paper was delivered at the flat for her. She had picked it up casually and dropped it again unread into a chair, where it now lay. As she sat before the hearth her eye wandered over it and caught the name "Coddington" in medium-sized print under the flaunting headlines. Naturally the name aroused her interest, and she took up the paper again.

"Uproar in the House," she read. "Labour member and Tory back-bencher exchange blows. Sitting suspended." She scanned the page over. At question time, it appeared, a Labour M.P. had asked why the report of the Coddington geological expedition which went to Ngamya three years before had never been published as a white paper. He had no intention of suggesting that it had been held up until concessions for mineral development had been allotted among friends of the Government and companies floated, notably the Ngamya Goldfields Ltd. But it did seem remarkable that, although in the last few weeks a whole flood of rumours prejudicial to the goldfields of the area and this one company in particular had shaken the stock markets, yet still no move was made to publish the report. Of course such a policy might suit some people, it might even afford them an opportunity of unloading their stock and getting out while the going was comparatively good . . .

At this point someone apparently had called him a leperous Bolshevik, and that was how the bother began.

"Dear, blessed old Frank," commented Enid to herself, "he's going to get into the limelight and have his report published after all. Strange that we should have dug up the forgotten affair ourselves only the other week. And his copy has disappeared on the back of his manuscript of a thriller. Too bad; he might have liked to look at it again."

And with that she went to bed.

CHAPTER SIX

A CHANGE OF SCENE

For the next week or ten days Craven was not much in evidence at the office. In general, too, he seemed preoccupied, his manner even suggested a touch of moroseness, though Enid, when actually in conversation with him, found him as charming as ever. She did not, however, betray much appreciation of this, for on her side she had suffered a mild set-back in her self-esteem, and was busy mentally kicking herself for allowing him to kiss her. Accordingly she was invariably busy during his brief visits to the office, and in fact worked very hard, so that she not only breasted the tide of current requirements, but also anticipated much of the work necessary for the next issue of the paper. Reviewing this happy result of her pique, she decided that her industry and virtue had indeed been great, and quite entitled her to taking a day's holiday long due to her. Could Mabel, Enid wrote, endure her for a week-end at Nidston, Saturday to Monday? Mabel Renshaw promised to try, and thought that she might under the circumstances even find Enid's visit an agreeable relief. Frank had suddenly gone quite mad and they had had a row. Enid was to come down earlier if possible, but failing further word she would meet the train that got in at 6.30 p.m. Saturday.

The news of this latest quarrel amused Enid—it was one of a long series. Mabel and Coddington attracted one another because they were so dissimilar, and not infrequently quarrelled for the same reason.

To think of them was to remember the contrast between them—he, huge in body, dark as night in complexion and, though intellectual, yet somewhat slow of mind; Mabel, on the other hand, appeared petite beside Coddington, was a blonde with large, wistful eyes of bluish grey and, despite her languorous appearance, brisk and quick mentally. Her most marked characteristic was the ability always to appear neat to the last hair of her fair head. If anything occurred to disorder her appearance her temper was ruffled too. She was very fond of Coddington, but ragged him mercilessly.

Enid called at the office on Saturday morning and eventually found she could not catch the earlier train for Nidston. In any case it was not particularly convenient, as it necessitated changing and a wait of an hour at a junction. As she left, Tubby Burton gave her a piece of information that he thought might interest her.

"The Boss," he told her, "has gone down to his watch-tower for the week-end, so if you want to avoid him keep away from Hutton Creek."

"Thank you for nothing," Enid replied, with a pretence of iciness. "I shall be a good eight miles away, and I can imagine nothing likely to take me in that direction. Get your 'spuds' in this week-end and the lawn rolled and cut. Good-bye."

Her journey down was quite uneventful, and she arrived at Nidston only a little after 6.30, the scheduled time. But there was no Mabel to meet her. Instead, Mrs. Renshaw stood on the platform and twittered welcome and many apologies from Mabel. They had to taxi to Little Nidston, about three miles away, and *en route* Mrs. Renshaw explained fully what had happened. She was an eager, nervous little lady, white-haired and fragile, and at first Enid half thought something unpleasant must have occurred. This was not so, it eventually appeared, from her account.

"Mabel's uncle, George Neil—he's a civil servant

—suddenly wired to say he was coming down to-day, and arrived about 2.30 this afternoon. He insisted upon Mabel's taking him over to see Frank Coddington, and we could barely persuade him to stop for a scratch lunch. Mabel was really annoyed, for she knew what the trouble was and had quarrelled with Frank about it. She did not want to go, but could hardly refuse."

"I'm so sorry they've had a row," sighed Enid sweetly.

"I don't suppose for a minute that it matters," said Mrs. Renshaw hopefully. "But Frank really is exasperating. I don't understand the matter; but there has been terrible trouble in George Neil's department over the loss of a report Frank sent in to the Government two or three years ago. He wrote to Frank repeatedly to see if by any chance he had a copy of any kind to replace it. All he got in reply was a most extraordinary series of letters from three different private secretaries, explaining that they had put the matter before Mr. Coddington, who would give the matter his attention in due course. The last letter explained that it was almost certain Mr. Coddington would be able to peruse Mr. Neil's esteemed communication in about three weeks' time."

Enid tittered; Frank had evidently had a bad attack of his elephantine humour.

Mrs. Renshaw glanced at her guest doubtfully, but continued:

"Mr. Neil suddenly remembered hearing Frank's name in connection with Mabel, and rang her up in despair. She agreed to go round to inquire and discovered that Frank thought he had been really funny." The good lady pursed her lips.

"Apparently this department had once been unable to answer some of Frank's letters promptly, and he had allowed the matter to rankle all these years. Men are strange creatures, my dear."

Enid promptly agreed and her hostess went on in a tone almost of horror:

"Do you know, when Mabel got him to talk sense he crossed his throat and swore he hadn't a copy of the report, and never thought he had all the time he was corresponding with poor George; it had been lost goodness knows how long.

"Mabel was so angry that she made him look for it, and he actually found it within five minutes. Then he refused to let her uncle have it; on the back he had typed something which he declared was worth £50 of any magazine editor's money, and said if Whitehall wanted the report so quickly they could pay for it.

"At this Mabel began to quarrel in earnest, and Frank said some very nasty things about Mr. Neil—George Eustace Augustus Neil is his full name, and he breeds canaries as a hobby. I think that Mabel was foolish ever to have mentioned those facts to Frank," stated Mrs. Renshaw with prim decision.

Enid again was well able to agree.

"But the whole matter must be most serious really, for Mr. Neil after much trouble had got round to the right person and been told to pay the £50 and get the report without any further delay, and especially without any fuss. That's why he came to-day and why Mabel had to go—as she said, there was no knowing how Frank might break out when he saw Uncle George in the flesh."

By the time Mrs. Renshaw had finished this explanation and repeated Mabel's apologies to Enid, they had arrived at Little Nidston. "Newlands," the home of the Renshaws, was a modern detached villa, comfortable and most efficiently planned. It stood in about three acres of grounds and, mainly because it aped no pretentious style of architecture, it was pleasant to look at, and nestled among the scattered timber of the estate without being in any way an offensive intrusion.

Contrary to Mrs. Renshaw's expectation, Mabel was

not there awaiting their return, nor did she come while they were dressing for dinner. This had been ordered early to suit Enid, and Mrs. Renshaw refused to delay it, feeling quite sure that after a train journey her guest needed a good meal—her ideas of hospitality were of the sound, old-fashioned type. But Mabel did not arrive during dinner, nor had she returned by 8.30 when they had finished their coffee in the lounge. Mrs Renshaw became anxious and began to twitter: "What could Mabel be doing? Surely nothing unpleasant could have happened? Bledstow was only eight miles away, fancy being so late. The Coddingtons would not be so unreasonable as to make them stay to dinner," and so on.

Eventually, to lessen the old lady's anxiety by finding her something to do, Enid suggested as the evening was fine that they strolled down the lane to the main road, where they would surely meet the belated Mabel and her uncle. Mrs. Renshaw readily agreed, but, instead of the two they looked for, they met one of the maids returning from an errand in the village. She was round-eyed with astonishment.

"Oh, mum," she blurted out, "I never seed such a thing in my life. Mr. Coddington and his aunt have just gone by, racing one another on the main road. You never heard such a noise."

"Racing one another!" ejaculated her mistress, both surprised and scandalized. "Not running on the road! You can't mean that, Emily?" Her horrified imagination had conjured up a picture of her contemporary sprinting down the King's highway in competition with her huge nephew.

"Oh, no, mum," the maid told her, "they was each in a separate car and driving like mad. Miss Coddington was leading and blew her horn as she might have been a fire-engine."

"Thank you, Emily," said Mrs. Renshaw, and walked on. "Dear me!" she remarked to Enid. "How

extraordinary! Sometimes, my dear, I really think those people must be—but then I won't say it, one has to try to be charitable. But what can they all be doing?"

They loitered for a short time longer, but to no purpose, and decided there was nothing to be done but to return to the house and wait.

Mrs. Renshaw's charitable forbearance was justified; the Coddingtons were not mad, but merely excitable. The explanation of their conduct was quite simple. As he had mentioned casually to Enid before they quarrelled, Frank had had no plans for the Saturday. But about 10.30 a friend had rung through to say he had lighted upon a perfect bargain of a second-hand car, and Frank really ought to snap it up immediately if he still thought of buying another. Frank rose like a trout at a luscious fly. His aunt cast a few pearls of deterrent advice with no expectation of their being acceptable, and with very inconsistent readiness agreed to drive him over and leave him to inspect his fate. She would go round to the Percivals', whom she had not seen for some time. If, in the evening, Frank did not call round there in his new acquisition, she would pick him up at the garage whence the second car hailed, or if necessary visit the local police station, unless, of course, hospital or mortuary was indicated. She was thoughtful and obliging was Aunt Lou.

As things worked out, Coddington bought the car after trying it out, and arrived at the Percivals about seven o'clock. He and his aunt unblushingly stayed to dinner, and left together not long after eight. His aunt demonstrated the fatuity of his new purchase by racing him home. She won by twenty yards, the pair leaving behind them a trail of scandalized spectators, including, as mentioned, Mrs. Renshaw's maid.

They took the back lane which led direct to the garage and housed both the cars. Aunt Lou inspected the acquisition and poured out a flood of condemnatory

criticism of the car, and of pity for her nephew. Nothing, she declared, would persuade her to give up their present car, of which she was part owner. There was not a better car on the road and, as Frank was relinquishing all interest in it, she would take it over entirely and allow him £5 for his share. To this her nephew responded with a volubility that made his usual conversational efforts appear mere tongue-tied taciturnity. They argued—if so mild a word has any force to describe the proceeding—for half an hour without reaching a decision. Then Coddington announced that the driving had made him hungry, and they repaired to the house with perfect but unapparent amicability.

Since they approached the house from the garage they missed seeing Mabel Renshaw's car, which she had left down the main drive, and the first hint of anything unusual that the Coddingtons received was when they found the house in complete darkness despite the deepening twilight.

"Queer," said Aunt Lou. "It's the girl's night out, but what's Fanny doing?"

They entered the lounge hall, which looked dim and shadowy in the waning light; the place was as silent as an empty church and apparently equally devoid of life. They stood still and listened. Not a sound.

Coddington snapped on the hall light and Aunt Lou plunged towards the kitchen. That was equally void of Fanny, and he brushed past his aunt through the outer door and proceeded to survey the kitchen garden. He did not expect to find Fanny held enraptured by either the nightingale or the butcher's boy—the cook was fifty-five—but somewhere she must be. However, in the garden she certainly was not. His thoughts were just turning to the garden well when he was electrified by a scream from his aunt. He rushed back into the kitchen and for a moment was dumbfounded by what he saw. His aunt stood by the pantry door, looked in,

screamed, paused, took another look, screamed again, and showed every sign of continuing this strange cycle of behaviour. As he remarked afterwards, the old girl was going off like an intermittent alarm-clock. It wasn't that she was frightened; it was merely her feminine way of expressing extreme surprise. What on earth had she found, he wondered, as he took the kitchen in a couple of strides.

As he got to the door her fourth scream nearly split his ear-drum; but the effect passed unnoticed in his own astonishment. This casual household stored its vegetables in an empty packing-case. The packing-case was there in its usual place; but no vegetables were visible because a small man was tightly wedged in on top of them. His inability to extricate himself was explained by the fact that his feet were lashed together and his hands tied behind his back with rope cut from the domestic clothes-line. A tea-cloth that had apparently been used to blindfold him had been displaced so that it now adorned his neck; but some still coarser towelling had been rolled into a gag and tied between his jaws and round his head; this was still in position. His eyes glared, his white moustache jutted out, his teeth champed on the gag; he looked like an infuriated terrier trying to gnaw its way through a stringy bath loofah.

"Damn me," said Coddington with unusual succinctness. Pulling out a pocket-knife he cut the man free and hauled him to his feet. "Who are you?" he demanded brusquely.

Instead of replying the man uttered a series of piercing yells and collapsed on the floor, writhing.

"Mind he doesn't bite you, Frank," advised his aunt. "I think he's throwing a fit."

Coddington cautiously surveyed their extraordinary find for a few moments.

"No," he decided. "The poor devil's knotted up with cramp now I've pulled him loose."

Waiting till the worst of the paroxysm was over, he gently helped the man to his feet and got him on to a chair in the kitchen, where he administered cold tap water out of a teacup—the restorative most immediately available.

"Oh, my God!" groaned the man at length, still continuing to rub and massage his thigh muscles. "The pain! Someone shall pay for this. The outrage! Felled from behind and trussed up like a calf."

"Who are you?" demanded Coddington again, now that the man was obviously recovering.

"Neil," was the hoarse reply. "Colonial Office."

"Not George Eustace Augustus?" shouted Coddington.

"Yes," replied the man stiffly. "The same. I came with——" He suddenly broke off and changed his tone. "Where's Mabel?" he cried in a screech of alarm. "She came with me."

This was another matter, and completely changed the complexion of affairs for Coddington. Snorting with anger and alarm he charged wildly round all the rooms on the ground floor. No Mabel.

"Try the cellar," suggested Aunt Lou, who had abandoned Neil to recover alone on tap water and brought up the rear behind her nephew in his career round the house. Down the cellar they plunged, peered under the beer barrel and examined the coal store. No Mabel.

"Upstairs," decided Coddington with a gasp, and away they went. The noise of their ascent was like thunder on the stairs and, as they rushed from room to room, the floors shook and the house vibrated. No Mabel.

Coddington pulled up and mopped his brow mechanically, and Aunt Lou leaned against the end of a double bed that creaked in protest.

"You don't think they've made away with the poor girl?" she inquired with a moan.

Coddington thrust the thought aside. "If they could spare her uncle, they won't have murdered anyone else," he decided, but his air of conviction was rather forced.

At that moment a low moan reached their ears. They listened intently. It came from the clothes-closet at the head of the stairs; in their haste they had overlooked it. Coddington wrenched it open. There, wedged among a jumble of trunks and suit-cases, half buried by clothes she had pulled down upon her, bound and gagged as Neil had been, lay Mabel, sadly dishevelled.

With a groan Coddington gathered her up and carried her into the nearest room—it happened to be his own—and laid her on the bed. Her eyes were closed. He freed her as quickly but more gently than he had done her uncle. She gasped and opened her eyes.

"My heart's blood," cried Coddington in mingled sympathy and relief.

"Don't be a fool," she croaked faintly. "Get me a drink."

This greatly reassured him, and with a good heart he got fresh water from the bathroom, while his aunt produced .brandy and sal volatile from the medicine cupboard.

Mabel chose the brandy. She complained of cramp and dizziness, and showed some signs of hysteria; but there was obviously not much wrong with her beyond shock and the upset to her temper.

"He caught me from behind on the corridor; but I got a glimpse of him in the mirror on the landing just when it was too late. I've seen him somewhere, only I can't think where. What about Uncle George?"

"He's all right," Coddington assured her. "At any rate he was. We left him downstairs. They may have got him again while we've been up here."

Mabel ignored this disrespectful levity. "We came

over to see you especially. There wasn't a soul in the house——"

"Where's Fanny?" screamed Aunt Lou, with rolling eye, suddenly remembering the one first missed.

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Coddington. "There's no end to this game."

"Don't stand there, you unfeeling brute," raged his aunt. "Look for her."

"Where?" demanded Coddington in exasperation. "She isn't in the house. We've been everywhere. It's impossible to overlook a fat cook weighing over fourteen stone."

"Look outside," he was told.

There was some sense in this, he decided, though he had already scanned the garden over and was sure she was not in sight there. A glance through the window showed him that it was now dark. The prospect of exploration was not inviting under the circumstances.

"Well," he stated, "there seem to be some people wandering round and asking for trouble. If they apply to me personally I'll do my best." Crossing to a small bureau in the corner of his room, he unlocked it and took out a vicious-looking automatic, which he carefully loaded in both chamber and magazine.

These preparations impressed his aunt. "I'm coming with you, Frank," she announced.

"Nonsense," he told her, "you stop with the others."

"I shall come," she insisted. "You can't see out of the back of your head; two pairs of eyes are better than one."

Coddington looked at his aunt with admiration. He knew it was useless to try to dissuade her.

"All right," he agreed, "but keep at the back; I'd hate to shoot you by accident." Having given vent to this expression of affection, he led the way into the garden.

There was very little moonlight, and although the

garden itself was an open stretch easy to scan, on the landward side the grounds were belted by the pine coppice, the gloom of which suggested a host of sinister possibilities. Coddington had not been in the wilds for nothing; he made straight for the pine trees.

"We'll beat this side first," he told his aunt. "If there's anyone here we should merely be parading before them if we searched the other side first."

She grunted in agreement, and together they began the search, using their flash-lamp with sparing discretion and moving with stealthy quiet. They worked along the whole length of the trees and right into the narrow belt, but they neither found Fanny nor encountered anyone else. This brought them to the far end of the garden, where there was a small summer-house overlooking the cliffs. Coddington opened the door with the utmost circumspection and flashed his lamp round; but the place was empty. On the seaward side the privacy of the grounds was secured by a hedge of cupressus, wild, irregular and full of nooks. But although they searched this carefully they found nothing, and were once more near the house.

"The well," said Coddington grimly.

His aunt shuddered. "The tool-shed," she suggested, snatching at the only remaining alternative.

With the same caution Coddington pushed open the rickety door, and here their fears were set at rest. Fanny was trussed up as the others had been, but was in better physical trim, for she had been pitched on to some old sacking where she could sprawl in comparative comfort. She gulped in some very welcome fresh air, swallowed hard several times, and then relieved her feelings by swearing with notable point and vigour. Her story was similar to that told by the other two, and as brief. She had gone into the garden to cut spring cabbage in the middle of the afternoon, had been surprised by two men of whom she had not caught a single glimpse, had been bound, gagged, blindfolded, and

pitched into the tool-shed. There she had remained helpless until released.

They assisted her in her stiff and protesting progress back to the house. As they were on the point of entering, the whole party was badly startled by Coddington's treading upon the domestic cat, a large black tom.

"Poor John!" exclaimed Aunt Lou.

Coddington at the moment had very little sympathy to spare for poor John, and said so emphatically.

They found Mabel and her uncle in the drawing-room, nursing their physical courage by the warmth of the electric radiator.

"Before we try to settle down again," said Coddington morosely, "is there anyone else we've overlooked?" He glanced at Mabel. "If you brought any other friends with you who are now missing, we'd better drag the well immediately."

Mabel reassured him on this point rather curtly.

The ensuing conversation was at first a comparative analysis of the experiences of the three victims, who compared notes and vied with one another in expressions of indignation.

Coddington suddenly cut across this babel with a question.

"What's it all about? That's what I want to know?"

"Burglary," said Mabel, making the obvious suggestion.

The notion left the Coddingtons unmoved. "Nothing in the house worth taking," they stated simultaneously. Neither had any use for jewellery; neither kept much loose cash about; they both used cheques for almost all their business.

"The report," suggested Mr. Neil brightly.

"What do you mean?" asked Aunt Lou. "I never heard a thing."

"The copy of Mr. Coddington's geological report," explained Uncle George, in rather a huff at being misunderstood.

Coddington shook his head. "Nobody knows about it," he said, "and besides, it's not worth the tail feathers of an old hen. The yarn typed on the back is a more likely thing; but, if anyone sold that, I'd catch them."

"The report is most valuable," broke in Neil aggressively. "I myself came down to-day for no other purpose but to pay you £50 for it. And to say no one knows of its existence is nonsense. We have been negotiating for it during the last eight or ten days. During that time the news of its existence might easily leak out. Not at our end, of course," he concluded loftily.

"Much less likely at this," retorted Coddington gruffly. Uncle George annoyed him.

"At any rate," snapped Mabel, "it won't hurt you to look, Frank, to see whether it has gone or not. That is," she added tartly, "if you have any idea where to look."

Coddington swelled with indignation. "It's in the study among my papers. I've seen it—er—well within the last few days. I can lay my hands on it in a few minutes."

Mabel and his aunt burst into rude laughter, which sent him headlong from the room to produce the precious document and so confound them. As he did not return immediately the others followed, to find him frantically searching amid the chaos of his belongings. The room was in a state of indescribable confusion; but this was so customary that Coddington could not say for certain whether the place had been ransacked by thieves or not. That it had been was, however, certainly established, for half an hour's systematic search, in which all joined, proved beyond all doubt that the copy of the report had disappeared.

Uncle George broke into bitter recrimination and roundly complained that if Coddington had listened to reason in the first place this disaster would never

have occurred. He was very emphatic that it was a disaster, and his excited and indiscreet comments gave the impression that everyone connected with the report had for some time been trailed by a crew of unscrupulous gangsters who had been determined to secure it at whatever cost. His remarks had an unfortunate effect on Mabel, and made her remember all she had ever read about Chicago and the brighter spots of the U.S.A. To her heated imagination it appeared only too likely that at that very moment a horde of thugs, gunmen, and hired cut-throats was still lurking in the woods round the house and might return forthwith to clean up any possible pursuers. In fact she expected every second to see a cluster of horrid faces pressed against the window, their noses flattened on the glass.

"I've had enough of this business," she announced suddenly. "I'm off home. Mother and Enid Petersham will have gone crazy wondering what has become of us. Come along, Uncle George." Her tone admitted of no persuasion or delay.

"I'll drive you," decided Coddington. "You're both a bit shaken still."

"Oh! Mr. Frank, don't leave us," implored Fanny, all her fourteen stone of flesh heaving and billowing with agitation.

"You'll be all right," Coddington assured her, with tonic roughness of manner. "Aunt Lou, you don't mind? Nobody will come back again, and you will lock the doors, of course."

Aunt Lou said nothing, but looked doubtful.

Coddington hesitated in face of this dilemma of being wanted in two places at once, until a happy thought struck him. He lugged the automatic pistol out of his pocket.

"Have this, Aunt Lou, and you're bound to be all right."

"Oh, no," she objected strenuously. "I've handled

a revolver, but never one of those. I don't understand them. I've been told they're liable to go off at any moment."

"Stuff and nonsense," retorted Coddington rudely. "They're easier to handle than revolvers, and much safer if you keep the safety-catch down till you want to use them. Here, let me show you," and he pulled his aunt to her feet and thrust the automatic into her hands. "Don't wave it about, for God's sake, keep it pointed towards the fireplace. Now grasp the butt firmly, your finger round the trigger, and at the same time flick that little catch up with your thumb. That's it, you've got it."

"Sp-r-r! Yow-ow-ow!" A perfectly hellish screech rent the air. It was, of course, John outside, moved by a love spasm or the memory of having been trodden on; but he so startled Aunt Lou that she pulled the trigger over the delicate sere and fired the pistol. The explosion was deafening in the enclosed space of the room, and the bullet, smashing the electric radiator, shorted the current, blew the fuses, and so extinguished every light in the house.

In her fright Aunt Lou stepped backwards in the darkness, tripped and collapsed upon Uncle George, out of whose body she momentarily drove every ounce of breath. Mabel abandoned herself without reserve to the hysterics that had before threatened her; while the cook flung her apron over her head with a yell and then rocked backwards and forwards moaning with terror. The muffled effect that Fanny produced was particularly unnerving because it suggested that someone was being slowly throttled in the darkness.

As was only to be expected, in this crisis Coddington found that he had mislaid his matches, and that the flash-lamp had been left in the tool-shed. He stampeded into the kitchen, but failed to find any matches; a search of the pockets of his mackintosh hanging in the hall was equally unavailing. He

appealed to his aunt, who by this time had disentangled herself from the writhing body of Uncle George. Shouting to make herself heard above the clamour contributed by Mabel and the cook, she suggested he went through his pockets again. Strangely enough the box had somehow got into his left trouser pocket—a place where no man has ever been known to put matches.

He left his aunt slowly striking match after match as though to keep demons at bay, and endeavouring by endearment and abuse to rally the wits of the others. The flash-lamp fortunately did not take much finding in the tool-shed, and he hurried back. Encountering John on the way, he unkindly flung him into the lily pond, where his sudden arrival caused nervous prostration in six goldfish. A few moments' work sufficed to change the burnt-out fuse, and the lights of the house flashed up once more.

The welcome that he received on returning to the drawing-room was not all that could be desired.

After this contretemps, and despite the arrival of the maid after her half-day off, it was hopeless for Coddington to expect any of the women to stay alone in the house while he drove Mabel and her uncle home. In desperation he finally packed George Neil and Fanny into Mabel's car, which he persuaded his aunt to drive; in his own car he put Mabel and the housemaid. Thus distributed, the strange party made its way through the tranquil night to Little Nidston, where Mrs. Renshaw and Enid had so long and anxiously awaited their arrival.

CHAPTER SEVEN

COUNCIL OF WAR

THE Renshaws were not on the telephone, otherwise Mrs. Renshaw and Enid would have been spared the suspense of the Saturday evening, and similarly Coddington need not have waited till after lunch on the Sunday to learn how " his heart's blood " was recuperating. However, his aunt having declined Mrs. Renshaw's invitation to lunch, he had to wait. This had a marked effect upon him. There is nothing like leisure to incubate a grievance. Coddington, no longer distracted by the excitement of the previous evening, began to dwell upon the problem of who was responsible, and the more he thought the more he became enraged with those unknown malefactors. The loss of £50, the value he had put upon the manuscript on the back of the report, did not weigh very heavily with him; but the impudent attack upon his household and visitors struck him as a gross outrage, and soon assumed the proportions of an affront to his self-respect that he had to wipe out. His aunt felt much the same and abetted him. Consequently, when they arrived at the Renshaws' in the middle of the Sunday afternoon, he was in that dour mood which precedes explosive rage and active resentment.

He found Mabel thoroughly recovered—she had breakfasted in bed and stayed there till 12.30. Her indignation, however, still simmered, and some remarks she directed towards his share in the proceedings had

a caustic flavour. This helped to make him feel all the more out of sympathy with Enid Petersham, who seemed to think there had been something funny in the affair. He assured her coldly that she was quite mistaken.

But George Neil succeeded in infuriating him. At the best Neil was never a model of tact, and now, being sore in body and worried in mind, he was definitely tactless. When Coddington reverted to the burning question—so wildly and perfunctorily discussed the previous night—the question of who was responsible for the outrage, Neil "hummed and haed" and finally said that there was not much point in worrying their heads about that, his department would be absolutely averse to the slightest public mention of the report, and so the less said the better. Certainly nothing could be done through any of the usual channels to probe the matter.

Fortunately Coddington was drinking tea when Neil made this pontifical announcement, and choked violently, otherwise there is no knowing what he might have said.

When he had recovered, he pointed out with acid politeness that it was his copy of the report and his attendant manuscript that had been stolen, his lady-friend and his cook who had suffered, not to mention his aunt and himself. He was perfectly willing to waive all mention of Neil's sojourn in their vegetable box, but the affair as a whole he proposed to discuss and deal with as he saw fit.

Mabel hastily intervened. "Now don't get your head down and begin pawing the ground in that fashion, Frank. What Uncle George means, only he's too tired and upset to get it out, is that there are good reasons, public and political, why we should not create a hubbub over what happened last night. He wasn't crowing in your barn-yard, laddie."

One of Mabel's sweetest smiles accompanied this

remark, and had more effect than her mixture of metaphors to mollify Coddington.

Neil, too, was glad to escape from an unpleasant situation, and hastened to apologize for any unintentional offence in what he had said. He immediately realized, also, that Coddington could not be brushed aside, and that, if he wished for Coddington's co-operation, he would have to take him into his confidence. This he proceeded to do.

"Mabel is quite right, Mr. Coddington; good reasons there are. If it is known that this report has been stolen just when we were trying to get hold of it to cover up the loss of the official copy, there will be a frightful scandal and my department will take the blame. The irony of the thing is that not a single member of the civil service is at fault; carelessness in high quarters gave rogues their chance, I suspect. Naturally we shan't be able to give that explanation, but will have to share with the Government all the mud that the politicians and gutter-press care to sling at us."

"Who are the rogues?" asked Coddington.

"People interested in gold-mining companies of the region," Neil told him. "They may be wanting to buy shares; then if the report is unquestionably out of the way they can spread evil rumour to depress the market prices without fear of contradiction. Conversely, if they have bought the shares and can, by creating a scandal, force the Government to publish the report, which as you know is favourable, up will go the prices of the shares they hold."

Enid had been listening with the keenest interest.

"Why didn't the Government publish the report immediately when Frank handed it in years ago?" she asked.

"They were quite disinterested and honest," Neil informed her without hesitation. "They felt that any likely increase in profitable gold-mining activity would

be more than offset by disturbance of agriculture and the aggravation of the social problems of the large native population."

Coddington had been very patient; so far Neil had told him nothing he had not known or been unable to surmise.

"All that is most sound and intelligible, Mr. Neil," he remarked—his charming suavity for the moment scared Mabel—"but when I asked about the rogues at the back of this business, I meant do you know who they are?"

Neil chuckled. "You evidently want me to get myself prosecuted for criminal slander, Mr. Coddington. As a matter of fact we don't know; though we may feel that when we are looking in a certain direction we are not altogether wrong."

"Merely conjecture then?" asked Coddington.

"Exactly: merely conjecture," repeated Neil. "Anyone who could get at the information would probably follow the same lines. You glance through a list of the mining companies in the region and immediately pick out the Ngamya Goldfields Ltd. as the one having the greatest speculative possibilities. Then you find out who is interested in this company. Well, a number of people are. The largest individual shareholder, for instance, is not unknown to certain sections of the public—he diverted them some time ago in the divorce court—a fellow called Trevor Craven."

"What!" cried three voices at once.

"He's my employer," said Enid.

"He sent Enid down to pump me about my work," shouted Coddington.

"He's down at Hutton Creek this very week-end," declared Mabel dramatically, without stopping to think that she was betraying Enid's confidence.

A dead silence fell, and the four looked at one another in rather embarrassed fashion.

"Dear me," said George Neil at length, "I'm afraid

we're being very indiscreet. Well, I was; I should never have mentioned his name; though please remember I made no allegation against him. We had better forget everything we've said."

"I should think so," snapped Enid, who had recovered from her surprise at the sudden mention of Craven's name. "The idea of connecting Mr. Craven with anything dishonourable is preposterous. He's a gentleman."

"I haven't met him," said Neil dryly, as though unwilling to have this opinion of Craven foisted on him.

"Nor I," echoed Mabel.

"Nor I," growled Coddington, "and I'm not going to forget what I've heard. The implication seems to me to stick out a mile high. What was his phrase? 'Concrete facts.' Yes, he was keen on concrete facts. Could I show Enid a copy of the report, not for the information in it, but just to give her an idea what it was like. No, I couldn't; I thought my copy was lost for good. That's what he wanted to know. I suppose you told him, Enid?"

She wished she was able to deny this, but she could not. Her silence betrayed the fact.

"Just so," went on Coddington remorselessly. "He felt quite safe and went on to panic the market over these shares."

"I'm sure he didn't," she contradicted hotly.

"I'm afraid," broke in Neil, "that to my certain knowledge that is just what he has been trying to do."

"Finally," wound up Coddington, "he heard my report was in existence after all, and had it lifted so that it could not be used to kill the rumours on the Stock Exchange and end his schemes for stampeding the market."

"I don't believe it. I tell you he is perfectly honourable," Enid reiterated, her eyes sparkling with indignation.

"Honour's a variable quantity," rejoined Coddington sententiously. "It varies from person to person, and each one has his own standard to some extent—to a big extent in his case. I'm not suggesting that Craven is a 'bad egg'; but my impression is that he is very likely to act unconventionally. He ought to have been born centuries ago, when knights were expected to be bold, and the rules of the games were admittedly open to the widest individual interpretation. He'd have made a good buccaneer to send with Drake."

"You're perfectly horrid. It's beastly to pull a man to pieces behind his back, to tear his reputation to shreds." The faithful Enid still maintained the unequal contest.

"I'm not doing that; I'm trying to understand him. In a way I sympathize with him; in fact I may be a bit like him myself," admitted Coddington. "He is this sort of chap, I think—if you started a rough-house with him, he wouldn't put up the slightest squeal, but would do his best to stave in your ribs. At the present moment I should say someone has stolen his pudding, and he is busily trying to cook their goose without being particular how he stokes up the fire. I don't mind this in principle, but I do object to the practice when I happen to get it in the neck, and I'm certainly going round to tackle him about the merry hell that was played at our house last night. Convenient that he should be at Hutton Creek—merely a matter of eight miles. I'll go round to-night."

The announcement of this bellicose intention horrified his hearers. George Neil foresaw the honour of his department being dragged into the unkindly light of publicity when Coddington appeared in the local police court on a charge of assault and battery.

Mabel sensed the joy with which her social circle would hail the scandal. If two local households revived the practice of territorial raids and family vendettas,

the sluggish tide of social intercourse would be pleasantly troubled in their opinion.

Enid's imagination was appalled by the picture of two men whom she liked taking each other by the throat and dying in a mutual death grapple. Neither of them was of the lounge lizard variety; in fact in her disgusted consternation she decided they were both dangerous brutes.

All these sentiments were expressed as a flood of protest which descended upon Coddington's obstinate head, for a time, it must be confessed, without making much impression.

Eventually, the two girls having been reinforced by Mrs. Renshaw and Aunt Lou, the original force of Coddington's intention was somewhat abated—one against five, including four women, is heavy odds for any man.

He refused emphatically to abandon the expedition altogether, but assured them he would not create any uproar or scandal; he would drive round and see what he thought about things when he got there. This vague statement, even if subsequently adhered to, still left him considerable scope for getting into trouble, and the two girls finally insisted on accompanying him.

Contrary to their expectation this idea pleased him, for the possibility occurred to him that Mabel might see and identify the man who had attacked her.

She silently vowed she never would, not even if the man stood in front of her for half an hour and declared his identity on oath.

They set off about 6.30 in Coddington's car, assuring the elder ladies and George Neil that they would not be long.

CHAPTER EIGHT

AT THE TOWER

By the time he had driven a mile, Coddington was his usual happy and garrulous self. He enjoyed being out in the fresh air, and he liked the company of the two girls. Enid incautiously stated that without a motoring-map she could not remember her way, and at the present moment had completely lost her sense of direction. He proceeded to put her right. His detailed explanations poured out in a flood and made confusion worse confounded in her mind, and his dramatic gestures and indications of direction terrified her, for she was afraid he would ditch the car. Strangely enough, the concluding paragraph of his exhortation was extraordinarily lucid.

"There is a straight fifteen-mile stretch of coast in front of us. At the western end is Bledstow, our place; then, travelling east about six miles, we come to Hutton Creek; two more miles eastward is the point where you saw Craven at the wreck; seven more miles approximately and you are in Texemouth. Mabel's show at Little Nidston that we've just left is right inland about eight, seven, eight and eleven miles from those points I just mentioned. You should try to memorize the main features of a district on the map, Enid, then you can visualize them at need in a moment, are quite independent of motoring-maps, and can't possibly go wrong. I only know the general run of the main roads round here, but, thanks to that, look at the ease and

certainty with which I have threaded this maze of lanes! "

" Have we much farther to go to Craven's place at Hutton Creek? " demanded Mabel.

" Not far," said Coddington. " There's the line of the ridge above the creek, and Craven's freak of a tower is about two-thirds of the way down the slope to the water."

As he spoke, the car rolled with protesting squeaks out of the rough lane, crossed a third-class road, and then found an equally rough track which led across a hundred yards of heath land to the edge of the bluff.

A sprinkle of the ubiquitous pines stood like sentries above the sea, and among them Coddington pulled up.

The view was extremely fine, and Enid was surprised to discover how high they were—quite four hundred feet above the sea. Hutton Creek, at that moment a peaceful inlet of dark, gently heaving water, lay about three hundred yards away, and between them and it was a wild and most picturesque slope of land, a happy jumble of grassy hummocks, outcrops of rock, fallen stone, clumps of pine and fir, a few silver birches, some larch bright with their delicate green, and thickets of bracken and yellow furze. Two-thirds of the way down the slope, on an extensive shoulder of rock, was a squat, three-storey tower, the last relic of a small, shore-side castle. It was reached by a carriage track along the edge of the creek, which in places Enid could see was perilously precipitous.

The track down below that led to the tower interested Mabel.

" That's where we drive along, of course," she remarked. " It's a good thing you had visualized the map, Frank; you can't be much more than half a mile out in your attempt to strike Craven's private road."

Coddington had already realized this himself and taken thought accordingly.

" My dear, I never intended to strike the head of the

carriage track and drive down to the tower. Too obvious and blatant altogether. This point I've selected is by far the most convenient. Among the trees here the car is almost unnoticeable, and that path down the slope is so screened by rocks and bushes that the odds are no one sees us as we work down and round towards the tower."

"You're a lovely liar!" Mabel assured him. "If ever anyone landed here by accident and without knowing his exact whereabouts it was you. You'll have to drive back across this heath to the road, and then along it about half a mile to catch Craven's carriage track at the head of the creek."

But Coddington would not admit the necessity, and with brazen impudence maintained that everything was working out beautifully according to his own original and intelligent plan. He bundled them out of the car and shepherded them, protesting and laughing, down a scarcely defined sheep-track which, with much winding and doubling, descended the slope.

In itself the walk was delightful, and the three had become so carelessly cheerful that the serious purpose of the expedition was forgotten. The outing would have degenerated into a casual evening ramble had it not been for Mabel, who began to complain that one of her shoes hurt her heel. She blamed Coddington for dragging her across a no man's land suitable only for skipping goats and army tanks on test. Coddington suggested she was imagining the trouble, and proceeded to explain how easily the mind could delude the body with a suggested pain that really did not exist. He gave instances, or rather he attempted to do so, but was cut short by Mabel rudely telling him to shut up. She sat down on a convenient rock and pulling off her shoe, pointed out the "damned nail" as final refutation.

"Of course that might hurt you," he admitted.

"Might!" snorted Mabel, and peeled off her silk

stocking. The pink heel of her dainty foot was red and chafed. She shrieked when Coddington touched her.

"Is it so sore?" he asked, suddenly convinced and sympathetic.

"Of course it isn't. Now the shoe's off it doesn't hurt," she told him. "You tickled me. Go away."

"You can't carry on like this," Enid broke in. "We're practically on the carriage track and Craven and his crowd may come along at any moment. It would be like the 'private view' at the Royal Academy —an admiring mob grouped round Mabel's leg."

Mabel replaced her stocking, but announced her firm determination not to clamber back up the hillside. She said she would sit down in the bushes on the other side of the carriage road while Coddington went back and fetched the car. Carrying the offending shoe, she limped across the grass-grown track and through an opening in the tall furze thickets. The other two followed and found themselves in a roughly circular space, twenty yards across, which had a glorious view of the sea, but on every other side was screened by the thickets. Mabel sat down again.

"Enid and I will stay here," she decided, "till you get back. You can run right in with the car, pick us up, turn round and drive back up the track without the slightest trouble."

"All right," he grumbled, "but I'm going to have a smoke first." And he stretched himself out on a patch of heather and got his pipe going. "What a fiasco!" he continued. "I come out prepared to investigate, and murder Craven if necessary, and this is the inglorious end. Hampered and reduced to inactivity by two helpless females—tender-footed and ticklish."

"That doesn't apply to me," objected Enid.

"No," he admitted, "but you'd probably prove actively hostile. Anyone tackling your beloved Craven

is more than likely to get a knife in his back, guided by your little hand—a modern improvement upon Lady Macbeth."

For a time they continued to wrangle until lazily they let it drop and smoked in silence.

"Well, I'd better get off," he decided suddenly, with a glance at his watch. "It's turned half-past seven already. I shall be back in about twenty minutes. Don't wander off and get into trouble; I might search this patch of coast all night without finding you."

He stuffed his pipe into his pocket and slipped away between the bushes.

His estimate of the time was sound, and he returned almost to the minute, arriving practically without a sound, having cut out his engine and coasted down the track.

"Where's Enid?" he demanded on finding Mabel alone.

"Mooching round," said Mabel. "She's done nothing but fidget all the time you've been away. She's in the bushes over there; you can hear her. In my opinion she'd not much mind running into Mr. Trevor Craven. The girl's developing a susceptibility."

"Humph!" grunted Coddington. "I suspected that myself. By the bye, that track is the devil higher up; it runs right close to the cliff at the head of the creek, and there is practically a sheer drop of sixty feet down to the rocks and deep water. Nasty place in the dark if you're not used to it. I suppose Enid isn't going to mess round long?"

"No," said Mabel, and at that moment Enid reappeared, and came rapidly back to them.

"I say," she said, in excitement, "there's no end of people down by the tower, and a couple of cars. You get a clear view just past the bushes there. Craven's there, too; I saw his mop of white hair."

"What do you mean by no end of people?" inquired Coddington, sceptical of feminine exaggeration.

"Five or six men," she explained, abating her suggested multitude without concern.

Even thus reduced the number was sufficient to interest Coddington.

"I'll have a look for myself," he decided, and stalked away into the bushes.

In a few minutes he returned, and it was obvious from the look on his face that his short inspection of the tower and the people there had been sufficient to arouse his interest and revive the original purpose with which he had set out that evening.

"I'm going to slip down to the tower a moment," he told them, "to see who those people are and what they are doing. You two girls stop here. I'll only be away two jiffs."

"I'm not stopping," stated Enid. "I'm coming too."

"And I'm just as certainly not going," decided Mabel. "I've had enough of this gallivanting round —the whole idea's absurd."

"But you can't stay alone," objected Coddington.

This remark piqued Mabel, and she told him emphatically that she both could and would, but she warned him she was not prepared to stay long, and at the first sign of her being benighted she would start up the car and drive home alone.

Coddington assured her that all he intended was to get back among the bushes on the other side of the track and in their shelter make his way to the tower, which was only about two hundred yards away. When he had had a look round he would come back. If Enid insisted upon coming, that was an additional assurance he would attempt nothing more. In twenty minutes, or at the most half an hour, they would be back.

On this understanding the two set off, and Mabel got into the car to wait for them, as she found the evening was going slightly chilly. Alone and cooped up in the car she soon felt bored; the shoe she had

replaced began again to hurt, and her exasperation returned. On the floor of the seat next to the driver's was a small compartment for odds and ends, from among which protruded the emergency starting-handle. Mabel prided herself upon possessing what she described as "mechanical gumption," and it immediately occurred to her that the starting-handle could be used as a hammer to drive down the offending nail. Getting out of her seat she secured the handle and, resting the shoe firmly on a large stone, with a few deft blows drove the nail down level. The trouble was slight; but she decided her shoemaker should hear of the matter, for the price she had paid ought to have secured her against such crude workmanship. Her shoe replaced, she stamped her feet in painless satisfaction and wished she had gone with the others. She decided to stroll across the path to see if they were anywhere in sight.

Enid and Coddington in the meantime were well upon their way. The ground immediately on the left of the track as it ran down to the tower was overgrown with interlaced brambles, which not only afforded no screen to their movements, but made progress practically impossible. But, by climbing up the slope a little, they got clear of the brambles and into the shelter of scattered furze bushes and stunted thorns. By choosing their route carefully they could dodge from point to point without much risk of being seen, especially as neither was dressed in light colours, and twilight was falling. The ground was very rough, so that, although both were active, their progress was slow, for they had to be careful to make no noise, and any unwary movement might set a small avalanche of stones rolling noisily down the slope. It was quite ten minutes before they had worked their way close to the tower. Here their difficulties increased, for they were encumbered by an excess of cover in the shape of a wild thicket of tall rhododendron trees. Through

these they were more or less forced to follow the line of least resistance, so that eventually they found themselves almost within arm's length of the side of the tower, but cut off from the open space in front of it by a thicket of stems through which they could not possibly force their way without making a tremendous disturbance. The trees, however, were so tall and scrawny that they carried most of their foliage high above the ground, and Enid and Coddington could clearly see the two cars and the men around them. Craven was not there, but by his Rolls was his chauffeur, who had driven Enid to the docks to interview the captain of the S.S. *Malabar.* Enid recognized him, though he was not in uniform, but dressed smartly in dark grey overcoat and bowler hat. The other car was a large Humber limousine, and three men stood chatting and smoking around her. All were complete strangers to Enid and Coddington. Obviously the two cars and the four men were waiting to set off—waiting, presumably, for Craven.

Enid and Coddington had observed all this in almost complete silence—the furtiveness of their own movements had led them instinctively to exchange only a few whispers in bated breath. This was fortunate, for suddenly they were both startled by the glowing stub of a cigar which fell through the leaves a foot ahead of them and threw up a shower of sparks when it landed on a flat stone. At the same moment they heard Craven's voice, and, looking up, got broken, flickering glimpses of his head and figure through the moving screen of leaves. He was standing at the open window out of which he had pitched the end of his cigar.

"You're sure, Silverman, you have got everything clear?" he asked.

"Quite," came the reply, in a suave, business-like voice—there was just a touch of Hebraic intonation in in it.

"Well," continued Craven, "it was very lucky you managed to get round. The chat has cleared our minds, at any rate. It's amazing that the market has not broken already; but the uproar over the suppression of the report is bound to have its effect before long, and then we shall get the shares we want dirt cheap, and Ngamya Goldfields Ltd. will be ours. But remember, not a move till I wire. You're sure you've got all arrangements made for swift mass buying?"

"Don't you worry, Mr. Craven," the suave voice assured him. "Just telegraph 'Scoop' and approximate price to 'Sinaiticus, Throgmorton,' and you can count the job as good as done, and go to sleep till it's time to count the shekels."

Craven laughed. "'Scoop' shall be the signal then, and the price will probably be near five shillings. The less the better; but certainly not more. Whatever you hear, don't get rattled. Wait for me to give you the word, and then act. But now we had better go down, we've kept the others waiting long enough."

"Right," agreed his companion. "That man of yours can come with us though. We can drop him at the station."

"No, thanks," said Craven. "He would be more worried than he is now at the idea of being a nuisance. His mother's ill, and a wire was 'phoned through from London for him. The silly ass wanted to walk to the train rather than let me drive him down."

The conversation continued; but the speakers turned away from the window and apparently left the room, so that Enid and Coddington heard no more.

Coddington stifled a groan as he eased his cramped body and moved so that he could see Enid's face.

"There you are," he whispered grimly. "Condemned out of his own mouth. What more do you want? He's the nigger in the wood-pile, just as I said."

To this Enid had no reply; the implication of what Craven had said seemed inescapable.

Craven and his companion, a tall, handsome Jew of about thirty-five, now appeared below. Craven shook hands with the other three, the two parties separated, got into their respective cars and drove off up the track.

Enid and Coddington waited a few minutes for the cars to get well away and in order to be sure no one else was moving in or around the tower, and then somewhat stiffly straightened themselves in their hiding-place.

"Now what are we going to do?" she asked.

"Nothing we can do for the moment," he said abruptly, "except to get out of this smothering thicket. Let's cut straight out on to the drive; there's nobody about, and we shall save ten minutes in getting back to the car."

He forced a way through and she followed close at his heels to avoid the backward slash of the stems as he released them. Sliding and scrambling they descended to the drive, which here widened into a stony space twenty yards by fifteen before the old tower. This was three storeys in height, but its massiveness made it look squat and threatening. Its small windows were like unblinking eyes, its narrow oak door, carelessly left half open, suggested an opening to a sinister gullet. In front were the broadening waters of Hutton Creek, and fifty yards farther down the shore was a small building that looked like a boat-house. Not a soul was to be seen anywhere. The whole scene looked eerie and forbidding in the gathering twilight.

"Let's hurry," said Coddington. "We've been a good half-hour already."

"Mabel won't go without us, surely?" asked Enid.

"Of course not," he replied, "but she'll start to worry."

The drive, though not surfaced, was in good condition, so that a few minutes' walking brought them to the gap on their left hand into the furze bushes. Here they found the car as they had left it; but neither inside

nor out was there any sign of Mabel. She had disappeared.

They went back to the drive and scanned it up and down. Neither there nor on the slope of the bluff was any figure to be seen. They returned to the car, and Coddington swiftly beat the thickets of furze all round. There was not a sign of her. He shouted and sounded the electric horn of the car. There was not a sound in reply—the raucous notes of the horn died away in echoes along the cliffs with a note of futility that mocked them.

"Do you think she started to walk home because we were late getting back?" asked Enid feebly.

"No sense in it," decided Coddington. "It's a good seven miles as the crow flies, and she was sore-footed to begin with. And why should she?"

"Then perhaps she did not like being alone and tried to follow us," suggested Enid. "You told her the way you intended to take to the tower."

"That's possible," he agreed, "but what can have happened to prevent her making the round and returning as we did? I'll go and see."

"You'll have to take me with you," she told him. "This place is getting on my nerves."

"Right," he said grimly. "Let's go."

Carefully they retraced the path they had previously followed, and searched left and right at every point where Mabel might have diverged. There was not the slightest indication that she had set foot on the slope at any point. They smashed a zigzag course through the rhododendron thicket regardless of noise and damage, but found nothing.

The tower, owing to the increasing twilight, looked more forbidding than when they left it half an hour before. A wandering puff of night wind wailed round the stone-work and the old door swung lightly. Enid shivered.

"We'll have a look inside," said Coddington.

They rushed inside and made their inspection at the run, so that Enid was left with the impression of a series of doors rapidly succeeding one another. She and Coddington flung each open, peered within and hurried on. The ground floor was occupied, half by living-quarters for a servant, and half by a kitchen whose range served a small bathroom at the back. The staircase was built in the thickness of the wall, the steps were worn and narrow, and the flights were continuously curved to follow the circular form of the tower. What light there was came through shot windows in the thick walls. Enid felt she might be knocked on the head at every turn. On the first floor was a large living-room which was sombrely impressive in the twilight, with its polished floor, oak furniture and severe walls, whose sole ornamentation consisted of a few antlers and pairs of claymores crossed over old targets. Above this were two bedrooms, comfortably but plainly furnished, and also contriving to preserve an old-world air. Lastly there were the leads of the tower roof. Nowhere was there any sign of Mabel. They shouted repeatedly and again got no reply.

The boat-house was locked and a large spider's web between door and frame proved it had been unopened for some time.

"If Mabel has been kidnapped, Frank," said Enid despairingly, "it's no use looking for her here. Those men in the two cars must have got her and taken her away with them."

"I know," admitted Coddington. "I'd thought of that; but it will save time to eliminate the easy possibilities straightway. There's only the shore to explore now. If she isn't down there someone's got her."

Progress was easy and they made a joint search until they drew level with that point of the cliffs where they had left their car—a tall, isolated pine was their unmistakable landmark. They found nothing. Coddington insisted upon going farther along the shore, in case

Mabel had wandered along and was unable to return owing to some disablement; but he persuaded Enid to return to the car. Not only was the shore frightfully rough, but the rising tide would make return still more difficult. He himself would probably climb the cliff, and, though she could do that, he doubted whether in skirts she could burst through the furze thicket at the top—in his previous search he had found it getting as bad as a zareba.

"You're a sport," he told her when she bravely agreed to go back alone. "I'll be quick."

He found nothing along the shore, though he made his way, jumping from rock to rock, almost to the end of the creek. To save time he risked his neck scaling the steep cliff in the waning light. It was a dangerous climb of fully sixty feet, and when he got to the top he dropped, panting, in the narrow strip of bracken between the track and the cliff edge—he had arrived again at the dangerous point of the road he had noticed when coming down in the car.

He had just recovered his breath when a faint swishing sound caused him to lift his head, and he was petrified with astonishment to see Craven's Rolls sliding by him, contemptuously dignified, almost inaudible in its serenity. Despite the screen of bracken, Craven must have seen him had not his eyes been fixed upon some object in the road. Craven pulled up, got out, picked up something, looked at it a moment, and then returned to the car.

Coddington in these few seconds had recovered from his surprise at Craven's startling appearance and was all eyes. Unfortunately for himself, Craven paused at the door of the car to examine again the object he held in his hand.

There was still enough light for Coddington to see beyond the faintest shadow of doubt that what Craven had deliberately stopped to pick up was Mabel's scarlet beret. And the immediate explanation flashed into his

mind that, having successfully spirited Mabel away—she had probably encountered and recognized her assailant of yesterday—Craven had now returned to clear his trail of all clues.

The red colour of the beret seemed to spread into a cloud before Coddington's eyes as he charged like a bull.

The momentum of his fourteen stone drove Craven crash into the car, out of which Coddington fiercely dragged him despite all efforts he made to cling to the control levers and any projection that came to hand. He outclassed his victim by about three stone of bone and muscle, so that when he threw Craven to the ground and hurled himself on him, he winded him and for the moment completely laid him out.

The swiftness of his ferocity may have saved both their lives, for their grappling in the saloon had knocked the hand-brake off and the car glided gently away. It swayed with dignified indifference to a dip in the surface, veered to the right, and then swung its front wheels round straight for the cliff edge. These fell over, the chassis dropped on to the cliff edge, and for a second the whole car hung there balanced; then it somersaulted completely over. There was a splintering, rending noise which suggested that some jutting spur of rock had torn all the upper body-work off, and then a final catastrophic crash when the engine and chassis smashed up on the rocks sixty feet below.

Coddington's brain somehow registered these impressions so that he recollected them later; but at the moment all his deliberate attention was devoted to Craven. The first wild burst of rage over, he calmly set to work to secure his captive so that when he recovered his wind he would not be in much of a position to give trouble. Coddington had the habit of wearing a superfluous belt of chamois leather. With this he strapped Craven's arms together behind his back with ferocious tightness. He utilized his knitted silk tie to bind his wrists with the

same merciless thoroughness. This done, he rolled him away from the edge and left him to recover.

This Craven did in a few minutes, and sat up with a gasp.

Coddington glowered at him, but allowed him to recover his breath thoroughly, and then:

"Get up," he snarled, "or you'll follow your car over the edge."

Craven looked round to verify the statement that the car had gone.

"Cost you £2,800," he remarked.

Coddington's fingers began to work. With a heave he jerked Craven violently to his feet.

"If you don't throw your cards in damn quick, over you go," he shouted.

"I shouldn't do it," drawled Craven. "You won't like that eight o'clock service. None of them do."

"What have you done with that girl?" thundered Coddington.

Craven laughed at him. "Search me," he said.

His escape from violent death was very narrow, for Coddington almost lost control of himself; as it was, the thought that Craven must be kept alive and made to talk just managed to penetrate to his frenzied brain. He pounced upon Craven with the one word "March!" and applied his strength through an evil ju-jutsu grip that left him no option but to obey.

The two staggered down the track in silence.

When they drew level with the détour where Coddington's car was hidden, he pulled his captive up with a wrench.

"Enid!" he shouted.

She answered him with a cry of relief, and appeared in the gap between the bushes.

"Back the car out, will you, and drive it down to the tower? I'll take this devil down there, wring the truth out of him and phone the police."

"Who is it?" she called after him, for he had

immediately begun the business of thrusting his captive onwards down the path.

"Craven, of course," he shouted back. "His car's gone over the cliff; but I've got him all right. I'll deal with him. He knows where Mabel is."

Her throat went dry with distress. It was some moments before she could pull herself together sufficiently to start the car; the short drive down to the tower was like some achievement in a nightmare and she never clearly remembered how she managed it.

CHAPTER NINE

IN THE TOWER

SLOW as Enid had been, she arrived at the tower just as Coddington and Craven reached the entrance, and so was in time to witness a very unedifying display of masculine brutality.

Craven had been very tranquil during the march down the carriage track, utilizing the opportunity to recuperate his energy. As Coddington ushered him roughly over his own doorstep, he pretended to stumble, and, before Coddington realized it was a feint, whipped round and contrived to ram the hard angle of his shoulder into the other's wind. Coddington's huge bulk staggered; but he did not fall. However, before he could recover from this charge Craven had sprung into the narrow staircase that wound up in the thickness of the wall from the right-hand side of the small entrance hall. There he turned at bay.

Enid was almost hysterical with dismay and implored them to stop. Craven laughed a nasty, jarring laugh. Coddington gulped and said nothing; his hand fumbled along the wall, found a switch and snapped on the light. In the gloom of the staircase Craven was almost invisible. Coddington blinked and hesitated. His own conduct of the fight had hardly been according to Queensberry rules, and he was now wondering to what depths of unscrupulousness Craven might descend. If he had studied in Paris and had had a little enforced experience of Apaches, it might, under the circumstances, occur to him to try the effect of a *coup de pied;*

in that case, from his vantage-point on the stairs, he might just about kick Coddington's head off.

Coddington's dubious eye suddenly lighted upon an old chair standing in the hall, and he sighed with relief. Seizing it as a shield and battering ram, he charged up the stairs with a bellow of renewed rage. Craven slipped away before him, and before Coddington could overtake him was into the big living-room on the first floor. His object was obviously to lock himself in somewhere and gain a sufficiently lengthy respite to enable him to work his arms loose. But Coddington was at the door before he could secure it, so, abandoning this strategic point, he retreated into the room and neatly kicked a chair in front of Coddington as he thundered in. The latter still carried his own chair, and this, in combination with the second one supplied by Craven, gave him a beautiful toss. He barked his shins and crashed half across the room, to bring up, fortunately for himself, in a large, leather-covered settee. This broke his fall, but overturned under the impact and allowed him to finish his career by smashing the legs off a cutlery canteen, which heeled over with a crash.

But the door had swung to again, and with his cramped hands lashed behind him Craven could not open it. Fortunately for him, just as Coddington found his feet again, the terrified Enid burst into the room and switched on the light, expecting to find the men in a death grapple. Instead they appeared to have gone mad and to be on the point of attacking her. Craven gave an adroit lurch at the critical moment and scarcely brushed her; but the huge Coddington sent her spinning against a lounge chair. The stampede continued up the next flight of stairs.

Being delayed at the door had robbed Craven of most of his advantage, so that Coddington was close behind him in the last stage of his retreat, and again he had not sufficient time to make fast the door behind him. He had taken refuge in his own bedroom. For

a moment he kept the door shut by the weight of his body, but in such a contest he was no match for Coddington, who burst in and overwhelmed him.

Enid brought up the rear and performed her destined task of shedding light on their darkness. She was past speech, and could only stare with wide, affrighted eyes at what she saw. Coddington had thrown Craven to the floor and was sitting on him with the fell and deliberate intent of quashing all resistance under the load of his fourteen stone. His forehead had been cut and was bleeding profusely. He plucked a sheet from the bed and proceeded with his strong teeth to bite through the hem. It occurred to Enid that he had gone mad; but his purpose was soon plain, for he proceeded to tear the sheet into strips with which to finish trussing Craven up. He paused occasionally to dash away the blood that dripped into his right eye from the cut on his forehead; as he did so he swore. Having tied Craven's feet together and put further lashings round his arms and body, he heaved him on to the bed in sitting position and tied his back against the wooden bed rails and his legs down to the bed. By the time he had finished there was a goodly sprinkle of blood everywhere.

The scene made Enid think she must be enduring a nightmare staged in bedlam; she leant over the end of the bed and wept hysterically.

"Give her a drink," suggested Craven calmly.

"You shut up," snarled Coddington furiously. Nevertheless he got some water from the cold tap at the wash-bowl and flicked some over Enid until she recovered sufficiently to fly into a temper. Finally she consented to drink. Coddington washed the blood out of his eye and staunched the cut with liberal applications of cold water. It was not serious, and he tied it up with a strip of bed sheet—thereby adding one last grotesque touch to the strange tableau. Craven regarded him with a calm, sardonic smile.

"Now, you devil," said Coddington, wheeling round on him, "we'll have the truth out of you. Where's Mabel Renshaw? You and your gang drove up this carriage track and she disappeared. I caught you recovering her beret to clear your trail. Where've you put her?"

Craven treated him to an unblinking stare and quietly yawned. Coddington's control vanished in a flash; the contemptuous insult was gross and unmistakable.

"By God," he raged, "I'll choke it out of you," and flinging himself on Craven he seized him by the throat with both hands and shook him violently.

Enid fortunately had quite recovered her presence of mind, and she flung herself between the two with such determination that she forced Coddington to relax his grip; by a happy chance she got the point of her elbow wedged against his gullet as she pulled at his hands.

"You keep out of this," he raged furiously.

"I won't," she stormed. "That sort of thing isn't done."

"What about Mabel?" he shouted. "She doesn't matter, I suppose?"

"If Craven's got her, she's safe. He's not a hooligan, at any rate," she told him. "And despite all we know and suspect, we haven't proved that he kidnapped her. There's still the odd chance he may know nothing about it."

"Why doesn't he say so, then?" sneered Coddington in stormy derision, fondling his Adam's apple, which felt tender.

"Because he's a pig-headed fool like all you men. He'd have his head screwed off before he'd consent to say yes or no under compulsion—that is if he really does know nothing about it. Loose him and see what he has to say."

"Not likely," responded Coddington. "I'm not

afraid of him, but he would raise hell; I'd have my hands full for half an hour; there'd be murder done."

"Well, then, ring up the police," said Enid desperately. At all costs she was determined to prevent further violence between the two men. "Tell them all about it. They'll soon get on the track of that Humber limousine, and if she's not in that she can't have been moved very far. They'll find her and they'll deal with Craven too when they get here."

They both looked at Craven to see if this suggestion had any effect on him; but his face still wore the same look of sardonic calm; it implied politely that they could do what the hell they liked.

"All right," said Coddington grimly, and went down to the hall.

He returned in a few minutes to say the instrument was dead, and accused Craven of putting it out of action.

"Don't be absurd," snapped Enid. "When could he do it while we've been here? And why should he do it before? You'll have to fetch the police; there are several villages within a few miles."

"And leave you here. Not likely," objected Coddington. "You go and I'll stop."

"I won't," she declared firmly. "I won't leave you two together. Goodness alone knows what the pair of you would do. There's no sense in making bad worse."

"Then we'll lock him in and go together," decided Coddington angrily.

"All right," she agreed, with equal asperity. "See that he's tight, lock up and let's be off."

Craven needed no further lashings, he was obviously helpless. They switched out the light, locked the door and went downstairs, switching out all lights as they descended. At the main door their plans collapsed; there was no key either to the Yale or to the heavy lock.

"Leave the door open," suggested Enid.

"One of his hangers-on might turn up and release him," objected Coddington. "I'll go and see if there's a Yale key on that beast upstairs."

"That will take half an hour," responded Enid, "and doesn't help much, for one of his men would probably have a duplicate Yale key himself."

"Then you'll have to go," broke in Coddington, whose temper was exasperated almost to explosion point, "and I'll stop here and keep the door bolted."

"I tell you I won't," stormed Enid, equally exasperated and mulish. "Mabel may be in trouble; but it's nothing to the brew you two will raise if you are left alone. You're like mad beasts. I'll stop myself, damn you. I'm neither afraid of you, nor Craven, nor anyone else. Get out."

Her temper had such an edge that to his own subsequent surprise he immediately went. The door crashed to behind him and, as he started up the car, he heard first one and then the other of the heavy bolts shoot into its socket with a bang.

"What a spitfire!" he muttered. "The whole world's gone mad." With that he worked the car into her fastest speed up the hill and into the darkness of the countryside.

CHAPTER TEN

A RE-SHUFFLED ALLIANCE

THE first thing that Enid noticed when she turned round from the door was the key to Craven's bedroom. Coddington had put it on the hall table while he looked in the drawers on the off chance of finding the key to the front entrance. She put it in her pocket. They had already noted that all the ground floor windows were protected by bars let into the stonework, and that the small back door was bolted. It, too, had no key, or they might have solved the difficulty of coming and going by bolting the front door and using the back one. There was nothing to do on this floor, so she mounted the eerie medieval stairs to the living-room. Having switched on the light she surveyed the disarray. The actual damage was not great —one chair leg and the two front legs of the canteen were smashed off, and there were minor scratches and abrasions. The canteen had spilt most of its contents over the floor, and these with the overturned settee made the room look rather a wreck. She sat on the table and surveyed it dispassionately. A box of cigarettes was to hand, and she helped herself. As she smoked, she found that there was no more to do on this floor than on the one below, and realized, almost with a start, that all her interest was on the floor above, and her inclination was to go there. For a time she struggled with this impulse and then yielded. Picking up the cigarette and matches and making sure she had not dropped the key, she followed the wheeling

course of the next flight of stairs up to Craven's room. Her footsteps echoed through the old, tunnel-like ascent, and she made no attempt to conceal her movements. She deliberately fumbled when inserting the key to give Craven some warning, but otherwise she walked straight in and switched on the light.

Craven was tied up just as they had left him. He blinked in the sudden light, and produced his usual slight, ironical smile.

"Take a seat, Miss Petersham," he invited, "any of the chairs. Or even the edge of the bed may prove comfortable and a convenient vantage-point."

As he clearly did not expect her to sit on the bed she did so, reflectively drew at her cigarette, and gazed at the amazing spectacle of the debonair Craven trussed up like a tough case in a mental institution. Still she did not speak.

"I hate to mention it," he broke in, "but you'll be careful with the cigarette, won't you? If you set the bed on fire I shall be rather at a disadvantage."

She nodded her assurance. "These cigarettes of yours are not bad. Will you have one? I'll catch your ash."

"Thanks," he said in acceptance; so she put a cigarette in his mouth and gave him a light.

"Well," he remarked at length, after he had rolled the cigarette from one side of his mouth to the other and got it evenly alight, "it's been a wonderful Sunday evening; brooding sabbatic calm that refreshes the spirit, and now this charming *tête-à-tête* with you. By the bye, I can't do the honours of the place. There are drinks downstairs in the cellarette if your friend did not smash it; but I rather think it was the cutlery canteen that suffered."

"No, thanks," she said. "Do you want one?"

He declined quietly and left the conversation to her.

"I wish you'd be serious," she said earnestly. "All

this is very unpleasant for me. It's not my fault I have got involved in this outbreak of intrigue and violence, but I mean to get clear of it. I shall be glad if you will accept my resignation. You'd probably ask me for it in any case, unless you prefer to sack me on the spot and fire me out with a month's pay." She deftly removed his cigarette, flicked off the ash and returned it to his mouth.

"Thanks," he responded. "But I hope you are not pressing me for a decision to-night. The problem's there, but it's not exactly immediate. There are others much more pressing, that by comparison simply clamour for attention. Of course if you are determined to go, if you want to go, that is another matter."

"I don't know what I want to do," she confessed lamely.

"Let the question lie, then; leave it open," he suggested cheerfully, "until a happier and more propitious occasion." He paused a moment and then continued: "I am very sorry you have been upset. Your friend's complaints were rather cryptic, and in the circumstances I didn't feel called upon to discuss them with him, so that I'm very much in the dark. But if any of my sins have been finding me out to-night, and it thus happens I am to some extent responsible for your distress, please accept my apologies. I wouldn't have had it happen to you for the world."

This was handsome, and Enid felt that he genuinely meant what he said; but her agitation did not diminish, rather it increased.

The situation was, in fact, rapidly getting on her nerves, and Craven's verve in maintaining his habitual charm and politeness further aggravated her feeling that things could not go on like this.

She suddenly sprang up from the bed. "I can't stand any more of this," she cried, and there was a suggestion of approaching tears both in her eyes and voice.

"What?" he demanded brusquely, afraid she was again going hysterical.

"All this," and she wildly indicated the way he was lashed to the bed. "We—we've been friends, and how can I sit and talk to you with all this between us? It's preposterous; it's outrageous."

Craven shrugged his shoulders—it was one of the few movements left to him.

"Lo-o-ok here," she continued, stuttering with emotion. "If I cut you loose will you be quiet?" She ended her words in a sort of run.

Craven's eyes searched her face for a moment, and then a reassuring smile appeared in his eyes.

"Dear lady," he said, with quaint simplicity, "I am in your hands."

Enid did not stop to analyse all that this might or might not mean, the sincerity of his voice was sufficient assurance—that and his smile, which for once had lost all its ironical quality. Directed by Craven she found a pair of scissors in one of the dressing-table drawers, and so made short work of all the lashings, including Coddington's beautiful chamois-leather belt, which she treated with no more respect than the rest.

Craven sat up and proceeded to flap his arms about to restore the circulation; they were numb and helpless. It took him quite five minutes to get them back to normal. He sluiced his face with cold water to refresh himself, dried leisurely, and in the same matter-of-fact way brushed his hair. Enid all the time sat on his bed amid the débris of the lashings and continued to smoke his cigarettes. Whether she regarded this as part of her duty as jailor was not clear.

"Now," said Craven at length, laying his hand lightly on her shoulder, "we'll go downstairs, find a couple of drinks, and you shall tell me all about it." He helped her down the stairs as though she had never been that way before.

"My hat!" he exclaimed, when he saw the chaos

in the living-room. "I hope your friend's got plenty of money; he'll have a tidy bill." He paused to put a match to the log fire laid in the open hearth, and then went on: "£2,800 for the car; about £20 here, and compensation for me—until the case is settled, only a life of crippledom lies before me."

He confirmed this last statement by righting the heavy settee with one dexterous heave.

"Do be serious," pleaded Enid. "What about Mabel Renshaw?" It was not without compunction that Enid suddenly remembered her. "Tell me the truth."

"Never seen her; never heard of her till to-night; don't know anything about her," stoutly averred Craven.

"But she's been kidnapped!" wailed Enid

"Sorry," he apologized, "it wasn't me. I haven't done anything in that line for years."

By this time he had produced cherry brandy for her and whisky for himself, as the best he could do in a hurry, and proceeded to pour them out. But she went on unheeding:

"And then there was that awful outrage at Frank's place when the copy of his geological report was stolen. Mabel was in that too, and saw one of the thieves. That's why she's been kidnapped."

"Who's Frank?" demanded Craven stolidly, without the slightest tremor of guilt in his voice.

"Coddington, of course, who's been here to-night."

"Not Coddington, the geologist, whom I sent you to interview?" he cried in electrified astonishment.

"Yes," she told him.

"But," went on Craven unblushingly, "you told me he had no copy of his report."

"I know," she admitted, "but he found it afterwards, and practically agreed to hand it over to the Government. Someone got in first and stole it," she added enigmatically.

"My soul!" ejaculated Craven. "Why couldn't you tell me this before, instead of running around in circles and making strange noises? Get into this chair."

He pushed a huge lounge chair up to the fire that was now blazing gloriously, put a cushion to her back when she was seated, and thrust a glass of cherry brandy into her hand.

"Tell me every word of what has happened to Coddington and all his connections," he ordered.

Seated in the corresponding chair on the other side of the fire, he mechanically drank whisky and soda and listened with absorbed interest to her extraordinary story.

Enid wasted no time, for not only was she worried by the mystery of Mabel's disappearance, but she also expected to hear every moment the return of Coddington's car, and then the traditional tramp, tramp of the policeman's heavy feet upon the stairs.

From the expression on Craven's face it was obvious that all she had to tell him was news, and that he was quite innocent of any share in the wild doings of the last twenty-four hours. At the same time there also crept into his face a look of dawning comprehension, and evidently what he now learned from her supplemented previous facts of his own knowledge, and put an entirely fresh complexion on them.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed at length, in a tone of ferocious disgust. "I believe that devil's done me down under my very eyes; I lapped up his lies as a cat laps milk. But if he has——" His voice trailed off into a grim silence which suggested Craven was harbouring the most unkindly intentions towards the unnamed adventurer who had extended his knowledge of the world and its wiles.

"Never mind all that," said Enid. "The problem is what has happened to Mabel. It's up to Frank and myself to do all we can to find her quickly, for she may be in a regular hole and need help badly."

"She may," agreed Craven sombrely. "If my guess is correct, the retiring 'friend' who is responsible for our troubles is not exactly an ideal host for a nice girl."

"Who do you think it is?" asked Enid.

Craven shook his head. "Just a minute. I was guessing as intelligently as I could. Let me try to test the guess. You haven't had much opportunity for gossiping with Miss Renshaw, but can you tell me whether she has been to Texemouth in the last day or so?"

"It so happens that I can," Enid replied, "though Mabel did not tell me. While Mrs. Renshaw and I were waiting for Mabel last night, I tried to keep her from worrying by getting her to talk about anything under the sun. Among many other questions I asked her if they had been motoring much lately. She told me they had been a run to Texemouth on Thursday. Of course I pursued this promising topic for an enforced conversation, told her I knew the place, gave a graphic, thumb-nail sketch of the harbour, and mentioned that motor-yacht *Corsair* as a convincing detail. You remember, the one you seemed interested in when we were there."

Craven nodded, reflecting that Miss Enid Petersham had shrewd eyes and a good memory.

"Mrs. Renshaw said the *Corsair* was still there," went on Enid. "She remembered it because two horrid men rowed ashore from it in a dinghy, leered at Mabel, and received one of her best stony glances—they are rather crippling, like body-line bowling."

"That settles it," announced Craven, with grim conviction. "It's Blantyre we are up against, and Miss Renshaw is probably on the *Corsair*, and in that case we've got to get her off quickly. He's rather a crazy brute when lit up by a little drink, as not infrequently happens, I'm told."

"I wish Frank would come back," she cried, her

agitation increasing. "Surely he ought to have found a policeman by now? Not that we want one."

"You'd think so," Craven agreed. "It's after ten; he's been gone a good half-hour. But if you are thinking of redirecting his attention away from me to Blantyre, I fancy you'll need all your powers of persuasion; the thicker a man's head, the harder it is to get an idea out of it. Not to mention the bucolic bobby whom he will presumably bring with him; he'll demand explanations. And," went on Craven, "I don't know that I'm particularly keen to lay all my cards on the table to convince them that Blantyre is the lad whom they should cease to love."

"I suppose it is rather difficult for you," said Enid rather dubiously. "After all, your business is your business, and the fact that Coddington has made a bad 'break' puts you under no obligation to expose all your affairs."

Craven was gratified at her ready understanding.

"While we are waiting—I suppose we must wait—I'll tell you everything—facts and surmise strung together into a coherent story. All in confidence, of course."

She nodded, and he continued:

"When I was in Africa two years ago I discovered for myself that the property of Ngamya Goldfields Ltd. was a much better proposition than even the management suspected, let alone the shareholders. As I had found this out by my own wits and at my own expense, I felt quite entitled to use the information for my own advantage. Unfortunately I was rather short of ready capital at the time, and it was a point of importance that I should get hold of enough shares to control the management of the company. Making the best of a bad job, I took Blantyre into my confidence, having been completely misled as to his character. He was to buy sufficient shares along with me to gain control. The affair genuinely appeared to go wrong; we were fore-

stalled. I got a fair block of shares, but Blantyre got comparatively few, and a number of strangers—six, to be exact—cleared all the shares off the market; between them they got about three-quarters of the issued stock. Blantyre was most disappointed, and although I can't say no suspicions crossed my mind, yet not till to-night have I felt certain that he cheated me. The people who took up the shares are his 'rabbits,' who hold the shares till he is ready to take them up. He does not want them to increase greatly in value till they are in his hands, so, as I guess, he stole first the Government copy of Coddington's report and then Coddington's own copy to prevent the publication of mining information that would send up their price. Miss Renshaw, you say, saw some of the thieves. She probably ran into them again to-night spying round my place, and must have betrayed the fact that she recognized them as belonging to the *Corsair*. They kidnapped her, cut my telephone wire to prevent an immediate hue and cry, and spirited her away. As she knew of their association with the *Corsair*, there is no reason why they should not have put on a bold face and smuggled her aboard. If she's not there I don't know where to look for her in the immediate neighbourhood."

"But you were interested in that report," remarked Enid judicially.

"True, O Daniel!" admitted Craven. "Not realizing that Blantyre controlled the shares, I was busy making public the present deplorable state of the company, in the hope that those people who had speculated in the shares might repent of their bargain and throw them again on the market, where I could snap them up. Until this evening I still expected them to do so. Now I'm pretty sure that they won't, and that I know the reason. They are ruled by Blantyre, and as long as he is about they won't sell, unless he tells them to.

"By the bye, I'm sorry I started to use you as a cat's-paw in the business by asking you to interview

Coddington and fish round for information about his report. When I got to know you, saw the kind of girl you were and learned how friendly you were with Coddington, I realized I had put you in an impossible position which anyone would resent. But, of course, you immediately presented me with the one snippet of negative information I wanted. I didn't use you further, but then I had no occasion to, so I can't plead that as virtue. Sorry," he apologized.

"I'm glad you have sorted out that point," she responded. "It occurred to me this afternoon that I didn't quite like it. I remember you received my spate of views about Coddington rather cavalierly. At the time I was disappointed; now I'll count it to you for virtue."

"Thanks," said Craven, and then, glancing at his watch, "but what has happened to your large friend and the local police? It's about twenty past ten. Is it worth while to wait much longer? As I promised, I'm at your disposal; but if I have succeeded in convincing you I'm not the kidnapping criminal causing the trouble, I'd like to suggest we do something. Without supposing Miss Renshaw is in any horrible danger, I think she is likely to be embarrassed by very vulgar advances if Blantyre is at all drunk, and, in the upshot, will be made very uncomfortable generally. Apart from Miss Renshaw, I'd like to have a word with him on my own account. With any evidence she has against him, I can possibly bring him to book."

"But what can we do?" asked Enid helplessly. "Your car's smashed to scrap-iron, and Frank has, of course, gone in his. It's about ten miles by road to Texemouth. We can't walk."

"We'll go in my motor-boat," replied Craven. "You can write a note for Coddington, giving him the facts and telling him to motor round with or without the bobby—without for preference—to Texemouth. There he can look out for us and cast his eye over the *Corsair*

from the land. We'll take them between two fires. I think it's a good idea, in any case."

Enid was inclined to agree, and certainly the proposal had the great merit of enabling them to do something at once. There was no knowing what had happened to Coddington and how long he would be. They might hang about all night and do nothing. She hesitated a moment and then:

"You get ready," she decided, "and I'll write the note. If he has not come by 10.30 we'll go."

Craven found her the writing-materials and at the same time, unobserved by her, pocketed a ·38 revolver and a packet of ammunition from a drawer of the writing-desk. Then he hurried downstairs and raided the larder for food. On such expeditions, he remarked, one never knew how long one might be away, and no wise man ever put out on the sea without a supply of grub. Accordingly he crammed a very generous supply into a large haversack, not forgetting a bottle of concentrated lime juice, some rum and a large stone bottle of fresh water. He pulled a cap on to his head and donned a heavy lined mackintosh. A similar coat he insisted upon Enid slipping over her light, tailor-made coat, which he wisely decided was useless to keep her warm on the sea at night. At 10.30 Coddington had not come.

"We'll leave the door open for him," Craven said, "but slip in a line to tell him to shut the door on the Yale catch. We're very casual at this place, but there's no point in leaving the whole show open all night."

Enid added this postscript to her note, which they left conspicuously pinned at the foot of the stairs where Coddington could not fail to see it. Craven picked up his haversack, switched off the light, and wedged the door with a mat so that it would remain slightly ajar.

One last look up the drive showed them that there was still no sign of Coddington, so, turning, they hurried down to the boat-house.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE RESCUE

ALTHOUGH there was no bright moonlight, the night was far from dark. The tower, the boat-house and the immediate details of the shore showed up clearly; behind them Enid could see the harsh edge of the bluff silhouetted against the sky, and over Hutton Creek the dark, looming mass of the opposite bank. By the time they had walked to the boat-house her eyes had accustomed themselves to the dim light, and she found herself noting such details as the white stones embedded in the rough path and the line of black rocks that jutted from the shore below the boat-house and formed a natural breakwater to protect it on the seaward side.

Craven opened the door of the boat-house, guided her inside and closed it behind them before switching on his hand-lamp. The place smelt damp, as boat-houses are prone to do, and was alive with the faint, eerie lapping of the water against the walls and boats. There were three craft in the house—two dinghies and a small day cruiser about twenty feet long. Craven climbed into the motor-boat and switched on the lights.

"Come inside," he said to Enid. "It's warmer in here."

She gladly did so, for the dankness of the boat-house made her shiver. The entire cockpit of the launch was enclosed to form a combined saloon and wheel-house. The boat was obviously intended for sports use, she saw; forward there was room for nothing more than a small galley and pantry, and in the bows the usual lavatory. She sat down in a cane chair and watched Craven.

He inspected the fuel tanks and grunted with disgust at having to stay to fill up. Clambering out again, he ran thirty gallons of paraffin into the main tanks and

poured five of petrol into the subsidiary one, used only when the engine was starting up. This done, he opened the sliding doors of the entrance, unmoored the launch, and boarded her once more. The engine responded immediately to the electric starter. Craven ran her steadily for half a minute and then switched over to paraffin, which she accepted without any demur. The engine ran very smoothly and, even in the boat-house which enclosed the sound, was almost inaudible. Craven switched out all the lights except the one that lighted the instrument panel, pushed the control lever to "forward," and gently opened the throttle. The launch slid out of the boat-house, glided well into the channel to clear the rocky breakwater lower down the bank, and was soon slipping down to sea. A very slight surface mist lay on the water, and, unlighted as she was, she moved almost as unobtrusively as a ghost.

Once well away from the land, Craven opened her out fully. Then, of course, the sound and vibration of the engine became more noticeable.

"What's the speed?" asked Enid, who had left her chair and was standing by Craven at the wheel, peering with excited interest through the windows of the wheel-house.

"About fifteen and a half knots," he told her, "but the flood tide is beginning to run, so that will give us another knot and a half of speed over the ground. We'll get to Texemouth easily in three-quarters of an hour."

They were about three hundred yards from the shore, which showed up to port as a dark bank. From that distance they could see inland beyond the cliffs, but not a light showed anywhere. Away to sea there was again not a gleam. The grey sea surrounded them and heaved slowly in a rhythmical swell, the faint mist streamed past, one or two stars winked in the sky. The whole scene suddenly became unreal to Enid. She must be asleep: it was a dream, she thought. She laid her hand on Craven's arm.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I wanted to see if you were real," she told him with a laugh. "The whole situation is so sudden and extraordinary that for the moment I didn't believe I was really here."

"I'm not surprised," he agreed. "We've been blown sky-high out of our humdrum existence and haven't recovered our wits properly yet. However, get a grip on yourself, for the night's young yet, and we'll have more fun before we've finished." He had edged the launch inshore till she was now running only a hundred yards from the cliffs. "Can you see enough to recognize that stretch of cliff?" he asked her.

She studied it for a moment.

"I can't really," she admitted, "but I suppose it is where the wreck occurred. Is that blacker blur at the foot of the cliff the remains of the steamer?"

"That's right. But the ship did not become a wreck. She got several holes through her bottom into her ballast tanks, but only in one place was she holed right through into her hold. A salvage party has been at work upon her for the underwriters, patching her holes with concrete and blowing up some rocks that prevented her being refloated. I went aboard a short time ago, and from what they told me then I should say they'll have her off in a day or two at the height of this spring tide."

"Remembering the look of her in the storm," said Enid, "I can scarcely believe it. Beyond a jumble of bent plates, I should not have expected to find anything of her left."

"No," agreed Craven, "I shouldn't myself. It's just the luck of how she grounded among the rocks and the suddenness with which the weather eased."

As he spoke he opened the sliding window in front of him to gain the best possible view of the sea ahead. A swirl of salt night air rushed round the saloon.

"Sorry for the draught," he apologized, "but we mustn't make a mistake here. It's the one tricky bit

along this coast. The passage through the rocks is only fifty yards wide, and there are no navigation lights. I would have gone out to sea and round the reef had we not wanted to save time."

He slackened speed and proceeded with great caution until, first to port and then to starboard, black rocks showed up through the heaving swell. Once assured he was fairly in the channel, he opened out again, and in three minutes was in open water once more.

"How long is it since you had anything to eat?" he demanded suddenly, when he had closed the sliding window and they could again talk with ease.

"Tea-time," she replied, "but I don't want anything. I'm too excited to eat."

"You'd better try," he advised. "You can't keep going hour after hour on an empty stomach. I don't want to show any lights on the launch, so do you mind carrying the haversack down those three steps into the galley forward and unpacking it there? Just to your right at the bottom you'll find the switch. I'll have some cheese and biscuits myself, please, when you are fixed up."

She stepped down into the galley, switched on the light, and then lifted down the haversack of food and attendant bottles from the saloon floor. Rapidly unpacking, she sorted the provisions out on the various shelves. Craven had not done badly considering the haste with which he had made his selection—there was bread, butter, cheese, tea, sugar, sardines, scones, apples, biscuits, limejuice, rum and fresh water. The last item was unnecessary, for contrary to Craven's expectation, the service tank in the launch was not empty.

She passed him up some biscuits and cheese. "What do you want to drink?" she asked.

"Not thirsty at the moment, thanks," was his reply. "What are you having to eat?"

She buttered one of the scones and ate it so readily that she fell back upon bread and cheese and proceeded to make a sound meal.

"Splendid," Craven complimented her. "You never know what you can do till you try. You'll fight like a virago after that; rescue Mabel and brain Blantyre with a nine-inch spanner. Fill up with rum."

Her mouth was too full for her to reply gracefully, so she let the point pass, and incidentally drank lime-juice cordial and water. Craven had the same.

When the coast fell away towards Texemouth harbour he followed its trend, and, as he worked his way into the harbour mouth, slackened the engine down to quarter speed so that there would be as little chance of anyone hearing as seeing them. The precaution was not unnecessary, for, as they came well into the harbour, over their port bow the *Corsair* showed up in the little cove below the stone jetty. On deck and below she was agleam with light.

"Well, they're there," remarked Craven, "and evidently busy. That's something to start with."

He throttled the engine down still further, till the boat had very little more than steerage-way, and at this speed crept slowly into the bank on his left hand. About two hundred yards below the *Corsair* he ran his boat alongside a large rock, which concealed her and at the same time afforded him an easy landing-place. Stopping the engine, he jumped ashore, slipped a light line over a point of rock and moored the launch alongside—she had a heavy rope fender in position all round her and so was quite safe from damage. On board once more, Craven pulled off his mackintosh and produced from a locker a pair of powerful night glasses.

"You'll be all right here," he told Enid. "I'll hop ashore to see what's doing and join up with Coddington if possible. If anyone turns up you don't like, you can push off. I saw you scanning the controls as we came down; at a pinch you could run the boat, couldn't you?"

"Yes," she agreed, "but how long are you going

to be?" Evidently she did not greatly relish the idea of being left alone.

"Not long," he assured her. "I can't butt in without a show of violence, and I don't want to do that if it's useless. If I get opposite the *Corsair* in that old warehouse, I can probably learn a lot with these glasses—whether Mabel's there, and how many men are aboard, possibly. Then when I know what I'm up against, if only Coddington and his policeman will arrive, we can assemble here and think about boarding Blantyre. Give me twenty minutes to look round."

"Very well," she agreed, "but try not to be longer."

Craven picked his way quickly among the rocks direct to the low cliff that bounded the harbour on that side, then, having noted this point so that he would remember it when he returned, he ran quickly along the beach until he came to the beginning of the harbour road. Fifty yards along this was the beginning of the stone jetty, and opposite the jetty was the ruined wooden warehouse he had noticed when at Texemouth before. He skirted cautiously round it. There was no one concealed round any of its corners; the next building was quite thirty yards away, and as far as he could see there was not a soul stirring anywhere ashore. At the back of the warehouse was a pair of doors, one of which was partially broken from its hinges and ajar. He slipped inside and listened. There was not a sound except the flapping of some loose packing paper in the draught which crept through the crannies of the shed's sides.

He switched on his electric torch and keeping its light from the doors and one window, cautiously played it round the place. It was utterly dilapidated and crammed with rubbish, of which a good proportion consisted of wooden cases from which straw, packing paper and sacking still protruded. The dust of years was thick everywhere, and spider's webs hung in filthy

festoons from the beams of the ceiling. In one corner a worn ladder led to the second storey. He carefully ascended and, moving very warily lest there should be weak spots or trap-doors in the floor, he explored this storey too. It was in much the same state, except that the packing-cases were lighter—a whole cargo seemed to have been dumped there years before.

Having satisfied himself that the place contained no one but himself, Craven found a convenient spot where a strip of weather boarding had fallen away, and through this spy-hole proceeded to examine the *Corsair* through his night glasses.

She was a fine, forty-foot boat, with a commodious wheel-house amidships, and living accommodation both fore and aft of this. Astern was a small cockpit partially roofed over, and from which the after cabin was entered. The after cabin was dark, but otherwise the boat was lighted up everywhere. Moored alongside by their painters were a small, speedy-looking yacht's tender and another launch. As the *Corsair* was only about forty yards away and his night glasses of superlative quality, Craven picked out all this with great certainty. But not a soul was to be seen, and it was her possible occupants that interested him, not the boat.

He lowered his glasses for a moment to rest his eyes, and in his perplexity lit a cigarette. He did this mechanically, but, as though by instinct, was extremely careful to show no light. With this between his lips he resumed his scrutiny of the *Corsair*. His watch was rewarded at last; but he was not much enlightened by what he saw. Two men, apparently members of the crew, appeared from the small forecastle hatch and after a hurried conversation crept along the boat to the after cabin, unlocked the door, switched on the light, and after momentarily peering in, withdrew again, leaving everything as they found it. One man hurried down to the saloon, where he was apparently in attendance, the other returned to the forecastle.

Craven made the obvious guess that Mabel Renshaw was imprisoned in the cabin; but his common sense immediately warned him that it was much more likely the men were trying to locate the ship's cat, which was missing.

In his exploration he had not yet advanced a step in solid knowledge. Apparently he had little chance of finding out much unless he got aboard and searched the boat; he could not do this except by violence, and he could hardly use violence without some knowledge to justify him. It was a hopelessly vicious circle that kept him helpless; and how to break it he could not think, except by some such wild expedient as swimming out to the boat. Supposing he decided on this, he dare not attempt it until he had met Coddington and explained, or the thickhead would arrive at the critical moment and ruin all by a shout of alarm. The thought of Coddington roused a feeling of exasperation in Craven—what the devil was he doing all this time, he wondered. Had he arrived? Was he hanging about outside? To settle this last point he started to hurry across to a broken window with rather less than his previous caution. Possibly owing to this haste he stumbled upon a protruding knot in the ancient floor and nearly fell headlong. He recovered himself without much noise, but his cigarette had flown out of his mouth and disappeared amid the miscellaneous boxes and rubbish with which the place was crammed. "Damn!" he swore. "I'll have the place on fire," and he hurriedly began to search for the glowing end. Though he looked carefully and even pulled aside some of the litter, he could not find it. He devoted three or four minutes to the task without success, and concluded that it must have disappeared in the thick dust, which had extinguished it. He might have spared himself all this trouble, for when he gained the window and gazed up the harbour side there was not a sign of Coddington nor of any living soul.

Nor was there any stir on the *Corsair*. Craven decided he would return to his own boat, report progress, or rather lack of progress, to Enid to relieve her suspense, and consider further the feasibility of swimming round the *Corsair*. He rather feared she rode too high out of the water for him to see anything aboard her when he was swimming.

These intentions were, however, swiftly driven out of his head when he reached the bottom of the rickety steps, for an unmistakable smell of burning reached his nostrils—the lighted cigarette end had evidently rolled through a crack in the floor above and fallen to the ground floor, there to start a fire. He located the spot and found the fire was rapidly spreading among some old sacking. He hurriedly stamped on a smouldering patch that already showed red. His stamping had practically no effect; the sacking spluttered and resumed its smouldering, and the red glow twinkled and spread. There was something familiar in the spectacle, and in the smell, too. Suddenly he remembered—fireworks, saltpetre. Nitrates had been stored in the warehouse, or else in the sacks, and there was enough left to ensure that the fire, started in so trivial a fashion, would not easily be put out. Craven pulled at the sacking with an idea of flinging it through the door; but disturbing it made matters worse, by shaking up the surrounding rubbish already beginning to smoulder, and only waiting for more air to make it blaze. Craven's action stimulated the fire and a tongue of flame shot out; it licked across some old straw, which flared immediately, and in turn fired a pile of wood shavings once used as packing in a case of fragile articles. In ten seconds there was a blaze that beat Craven back; further effort on his part, he realized, was useless. Nothing but an immediate supply of water in large quantities could quench such a fire, and that could not possibly be forthcoming in time. He comforted himself, as he squeezed through the door, with the thought that the whole

place was not worth ten pounds for firewood, and was so isolated that its destruction could not on so still a night spread to the other property.

He lost no time in making himself scarce.

At a later date he could refund the damage anonymously—that would be a triviality; but to be arrested for arson on the scene of the fire would be an unpleasant complication, and quite spoil the rest of the night. Hastily he retreated down the harbour road and found a safe hiding-place among the rocks, whence he could watch both the promised bonfire and the *Corsair*.

The fire was not long in materializing; among the jumbled contents of the warehouse it must have found other choice morsels besides the sacking impregnated with nitrates, and in any case the whole place was combustible and very dry. Within five minutes flames were leaping out of the ground-floor window; they licked up the side of the building and fired the fumes pouring from the second storey; with a roar the whole place went up in flames.

There was a shout up the harbour road, and two villagers came running down the street from the centre of Texemouth. It was now twelve o'clock; but a few of the more ungodly and least disposed to early rising were still awake.

Craven glanced across at the *Corsair* and saw four figures on her deck. Hastily he brought his glasses to bear on the group. Blantyre was there, and a man in dinner-jacket; the other two men were those Craven had already seen on the boat. Blantyre and his friend stood there apparently amused by the spectacle; they clapped each other on the back and swayed more than the faint motion of the *Corsair* could possibly warrant. Much against their will, or so it seemed, the two members of the crew were sent ashore in the tender to investigate and report. Blantyre's friend found the night air chilly, or his bottle attractive, and went below;

Blantyre lingered, but appeared likely to rejoin him at any moment.

In a flash Craven realized that unintentionally he had created his own opportunity. While that fire raged no one would have eyes for anything else. Two men had left the *Corsair;* the two that remained were probably drunk. He could run his own boat alongside and board Blantyre's craft without being spotted at all. Cramming his glasses into their case, he raced along the beach at the foot of the cliffs—fortunately it was shingle, fairly clear of large rocks—until he was level with the launch. Out of consideration for his own neck and limbs he had to negotiate the rocks of the shore with more care, but nevertheless his arrival was so startlingly sudden that Enid was momentarily thrown into a panic—she jumped to the conclusion that he was fleeing for his life before a whole gang of cut-throats.

Craven reassured her with a muttered word, and freeing the mooring-line, gathered it up and cast it aboard. With a strong thrust he set the launch in motion to clear the rock, and boarded her at the last moment as she glided away.

A touch on the starter and the engine was gently purring, and with scarcely a sound the launch crept round in a semi-circle upon the *Corsair,* which was silhouetted against the glare of the fire and threw a long patch of shadow across the water of the harbour.

Craven guided his launch into this long lane of darkness and, with engine throttled down to minimum, gently glided down upon his objective.

When twenty yards away he stopped his engine, and, assisted by the current, had just sufficient steerage-way to draw alongside the *Corsair* with never a jar.

Enid had entered with vast zest into the spirit of the enterprise and helped him to hold the launch just clear of the larger boat. The *Corsair* was moored stem and stern parallel to the shore, so that she had not swung stern first up the harbour with the flood tide. They

were under her starboard quarter and noticed that the lights of the after cabin were now on. Craven glanced through one of the port lights and started at what he saw. He hurriedly beckoned Enid to come along the launch to him.

"Is that Mabel Renshaw?" he asked.

Enid looked through the circular window into the small cabin. A dark, flashily handsome man swayed hilariously in the middle of the floor, and in front of him there cowered against the bulkhead a pale, terrified girl.

"Yes, that's Mabel," she said. "Is that Blantyre?"

"It is," Craven assured her grimly. "Hang on here and don't let the launch grind against the quarter to give the alarm. You'll be able to see the fun."

Picking up a spare mooring-line he slung it loosely round his neck, and then, with a lithe swing, heaved himself silently over the stern of the *Corsair* into the cockpit. Enid, gazing slantwise through the port-light, could just see him hovering in the doorway, a mute, sardonic figure.

Mabel's terrified eyes were riveted on Blantyre, and Blantyre was engrossed in pouring out a flood of pretty lady talk. Strangely enough, he seemed surprised to find her there, but had no doubt she was aboard expressly for his physical delight. His invitation was being extended to her in most grossly licentious terms when a noose of mooring-line was slipped over his head and drawn cruelly tight between his jaws. He clapped his hands to his head, and the line, sweeping round and round, lashed his forearms to his neck. His elbows were tied to his sides and his ankles together. The whole business took only half a minute, and the strange silence was only disturbed by Mabel slipping to the floor in a dead faint.

Craven picked her up and carried her carefully into the cockpit. From there he carefully slid her over the bulwark on the quarter into Enid's hard, slim arms. The business was ticklish, for, at the same time as they

made the transfer, they had to prevent the two craft either grinding noisily together or drifting apart. They managed it.

To Enid's dismay, instead of joining her, Craven turned back into the *Corsair's* after cabin, out of which he roughly dragged Blantyre. He heaved him over the side and, without much care to lighten his fall, allowed him to drop on to the launch's small after deck over the fuel tanks—a rail nine inches high alone kept him from rolling into the sea.

Before Craven could get clear, Blantyre's bibulous friend came shambling across the deck that formed the roof of the after cabin. He saw Enid in the launch alongside and heard Blantyre, as he thought, in the cockpit at his feet. His besotted mind jumped to easy conclusions.

"Ah, Blan-thire—hic!—you old dog—are you—hic! —unloading your dicky-birds?—hic! Is this where you—hic!—keep 'em? Forgive me, ol'—hic!—chappie —if I'm wrong—but——"

How he interpreted the reply he got he has never explained. Craven saw him kneeling over the cockpit, leering with gross amusement, and, expecting he would fall over in any case, he unkindly took him by the throat, dragged him down into the cockpit, gave his head a crack against the door jamb to quieten him, and pitched him into the cabin.

This done, he clambered aboard his own boat and pushed her clear of the motor-cruiser. Mabel was still lying on the deck outside the wheel-house, but was recovering from her faint. He helped her into the saloon. Blantyre he tied to the rails on the after deck, but not until he had readjusted his bonds so that there was no longer any chance of his being slowly throttled—by no means an impossibility if left as he had been originally trussed up.

All this took time, and Enid had administered rum and water to Mabel and had had a nip herself with most

beneficial effects before Craven was ready to start up. He had drifted only about ten yards clear of the *Corsair*. Just as his toe hovered over the button of the electric starter, a terrific racket broke out on the other boat. Blantyre's friend rushed out of the cabin, and, leaning over the stern, poured out a stream of imprecations. He played the light of a flash-lamp over the launch.

"Damn it," said Craven regretfully, "he's come round. I didn't hit him hard enough." He started up his own engine and had got nicely under way when the raucous bellow of the *Corsair's* electric siren rent the air.

"He means trouble, that chap," decided Craven. "I really should have hammered him, but I let him off because he was drunk. And my mild tap has merely sobered him. Live and learn."

As the summons was obviously intended for the two men ashore, Craven naturally looked towards the pier to see if there was any immediate response. The fire still threw up a sullen glow, and a number of figures could be seen in bright relief against it. A little way along the jetty a fight seemed to be in progress. He snatched up his glasses and left the wheel unattended a moment. He took only a short glance; but it proved that his first impression had been correct. Three men were certainly hard at it on the pier, and, while he watched, a fourth joined in with great vigour, the immediate result being that one man was knocked clean into the sea. Craven could not be sure, but he thought it was the new-comer who met with this reward for his intervention. Anyway, Craven reflected, there was deep water to break his fall and plenty of people to pull him out, so it was unlikely he would come to much harm. He hoped it was Coddington; it would do the useless blighter good—clear his head.

Cheered up by this charitable hope, he set the launch driving full speed for home and turned to inquire after the well-being of Mabel, to whom he now spoke for the first time.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE PURSUIT

THE situation was not without a touch of ironical humour. Mabel assured Craven in rather a dubious voice that she was all right; but her tone suggested not only that she still felt somewhat shaken, but that she was thoroughly bewildered as to who he might be. Enid introduced him and hastened to explain that the supposed ogre had proved to be the knight-errant, and that Mabel owed her rescue to the man they had blamed for her unpleasant experience of the previous night. Craven tried to laugh the situation away; but Mabel, when she had digested this surprising news, offered him her thanks mingled with much apology for maligning him.

"Don't worry," Craven told her, "the mystery is cleared up; our friend tied up aft is the explanation of it all. I'll thrash the matter out with him, and one or two other points, when I've time."

Enid for the moment had forgotten Blantyre, and the mention of him caused her impulsively to turn her head to see if he was still there. She was momentarily dazzled by a strong beam of light, that flashed across her eyes and then swung back to shine into the wheel-house, in which it was reflected from side to side by the glass of the windows, to produce a queer, flickering illumination.

"What's that?" she cried, and Mabel half started in alarm from the cane chair in which they had put her.

Craven gave a swift glance over his shoulder.

"Small searchlight on the *Corsair*," he told her laconically. "Evidently they've not lost interest in us. They want to see which way we are heading."

"But what can they do?" asked Enid.

"Follow us, of course," he said, with a careless laugh. "They've got a yacht tender and a motor-launch; either might be good enough to give us a run for our money. We shall see."

As he spoke they rounded the bulge of the coast and escaped from the beam of the searchlight, which in any case was not powerful enough to follow them effectively much farther. Enid had expected Craven to turn out to sea to avoid the risky passage through the reef; but he showed no signs of edging away from the land.

"Are you going back by the passage through the rocks?" she asked, somewhat nervously.

"Yes," he said. "If those fellows follow us, there is a chance they don't know this course properly, and so will pile up on the reef, one or another of them. That will suit us nicely," he decided, with primitive *naïveté*.

In silence he proceeded to coax the utmost speed out of the launch, which swept up the long undulations of the swell and down the succeeding slopes with a sort of reckless abandon that, at another time, would have afforded exhilarating pleasure. Weather conditions had not changed at all. The night was still calm and light, though the moon presently remained hidden behind clouds that diffused its brightness; the sea was a grey and quietly heaving plain; the land a dark bank—that it was now to starboard was the only difference.

Enid glanced back over the dull white track of their wake to see if there was any sign of pursuit. Craven told her that the motor-boats would show no lights and so would certainly be invisible. However, he too was anxious to know if they were being followed, and after about ten minutes he opened one of the rear windows

of the wheel-house and shut his own engine completely off for a moment.

The sudden silence and cessation of all vibration was almost startling. Craven thrust his head through the window and listened. Blantyre swore at him; but Craven ordered him to shut up with such ferocity that he instantly obeyed. The most noticeable sound was the lapping of the water round the launch, intermingled with a louder slap under her counter as she wallowed in the swell; but Craven's keen ear caught something else. Along the line of the cliffs, which seemed to multiply it, came the throb of a motor exhaust. He could not be sure if he was listening to the exhausts of both launches, but he rather feared so. However, it was best to know the worst, for he could then prepare as far as possible to counter it. He quickly set his own engine running again and was once more away, slipping along the coast at top speed.

When they were about a mile and a half from the passage through the reef, the moon suddenly sailed clear of the clouds and lighted up the whole seascape brightly. The slight mist that had been apparent earlier had disappeared, and in the flood of moonlight everything was clearly distinct. The coachwork of the wheel-house cast sharp shadows on the floor; the sea brightened in appearance, and varied lighting effects appeared over its wide surface; the dark bank of the land lost its characterlessness, so that the alternately advancing and receding curves of the cliffs became apparent, while above them the folds and slopes of the low hills showed up as they followed the coast and melted away inland.

Craven quickly seized this opportunity to see exactly how many boats were pursuing them, and how close they were. He gave the wheel into Enid's hands and, crawling through one of the rear windows, climbed on top of the wheel-house. From this swaying vantage-

point he got a good view astern, and one glance was sufficient to show him that the small yacht's tender was only a mile behind and rapidly overhauling them, and that, behind her, the larger motor-launch was maintaining a pace almost equally threatening.

He leisurely clambered down past Blantyre, who glared ,malevolently, and re-entered the wheel-house with an assumed indifference that was meant to reassure the girls, but which in the case of Enid did not succeed. However, she had the good sense to make no remarks which might have alarmed Mabel, who was now rapidly recovering. It was having two girls on his hands that worried Craven; if he had had only his own skin to consider, the prospect of a scrap would have exhilarated him; as it was, the chance of the girls getting hurt perturbed him.

He was casting round for expedients in this emergency when a fresh source of exasperating worry arose. The engine began momentarily to change its note, and a corresponding stutter would appear in the sound of the exhaust—one of the cylinders was occasionally misfiring. Craven had had the trouble before. When run all out the engine tended to overoil herself, and began to soot up her plugs. Now it had set in, the trouble would increase and soon there would be a marked loss of speed until eventually she stopped.

All this time he had deliberately refrained from taking over the wheel from Enid. He had told her to steer for the furthermost dark point of land they could see, and he was interested to watch if she could hold the boat on the course without yawing wildly from side to side. He was relieved to find she could. The beginning of the passage through the reef was only about a quarter of a mile ahead.

"Port a little," he said, and Enid obeyed, but suggested he took the helm.

"I can't," he replied. "I'll get you started plumb in the centre of the channel; but you'll have to take us

through. It's not hard. I want to admire the scenery aft, and tell Blantyre how happy we're going to be together."

He glanced back at the pursuing boats, which were now about two hundred and fifty to three hundred yards away. Rapidly he rummaged through some of the lockers under the seats until he found two coils of thin rope. After examining them to see they were evenly coiled without any suspicion of fouling, he tied them tightly end to end and tentatively swung them in his hands, practising the motion of flinging them simultaneously one to left and one to right. He seemed satisfied and once more betook himself to the small after deck where the cold and infuriated Blantyre gibbered. Looking over the roof of the wheel-house, he conned the course of the boat which was now entering the lane through the rocks. He shouted a few directions to Enid, who skilfully obeyed, and took the boat down the centre of the channel. Craven continued to act as pilot till the boat was on the point of entering the narrowest point of the channel, where it was about thirty yards wide. They were safely in the middle, he saw. Swiftly he balanced himself lightly on the deck, swung the coils of rope once or twice, and then deftly flung them both at the same time, so that they uncoiled and fell in a straight line across the middle of the channel.

The success of his plan was all a matter of luck; but with the boats rolling as they took the swell there was a definite chance that one or other of them might pick up the rope with its propellor. It would thus be put out of action in such a dangerous position that the other would have to stop and at least tow it clear of the rocky channel into open water.

Craven looked hastily ahead to assure himself that his own boat was headed safely on her course, and blessed Enid's competence when he saw the bows, as they rose and fell, pointed accurately midway between

the rocks to left and right. He turned again to watch the pursuit, now only fifty yards behind him, and suddenly could have danced for joy, had he had more, and less precarious, space. With a wild splutter of her engine, the yacht's tender that was leading stopped. The trick had worked. The occupant of the other boat evidently was not well acquainted with the channel, for he was so unwilling to leave the mid course that he narrowly missed running the crippled tender down, he was so close behind. He too stopped.

All this time the spell of brilliant moonlight had continued. Without it Enid would probably have been too nervous to attempt bringing the boat through the rocks. Craven allowed her to complete the passage without distraction before he crept back into the wheel-house with the glad news that he had crippled one boat and held up the other by the necessity of towing its companion to safety. His glee was, however, very much modified by the behaviour of his own boat. The engine was firing abominably, and their speed had dropped rapidly in the last few minutes till they were only doing about seven knots. But for the success of his trick they would have been already overhauled, and it was still easily possible for the second boat to give its companion all necessary assistance and then over-take them long before they could get back to Hutton Creek—and that if his engine continued to run: the probability was that it would stop in another quarter of an hour.

Thinking still of the two girls, Craven decided to play for safety. The moonlight enabled him to estimate his position accurately. A mile away over the starboard bow was the stretch of cliff at the foot of which the grounded tramp steamer lay. He set his course directly for her.

"What's the idea?" demanded Enid, in great sur-prise, and Mabel bestirred herself to glance first at the cliffs towards which they were heading, and then back

to the two motor-boats, which still lay in the channel and were now three hundred yards behind.

"Aren't we going straight back?" she asked anxiously.

"Don't worry," said Craven with a laugh. "I'm only being very cautious. The engine is running badly; but I can easily reach that German tramp under the cliffs and tie up alongside. If those blighters from the *Corsair* give up the chase, I'll soon clean all the plugs and run home in fine style; but, if they don't, and follow us, I can get you girls through the caves and up the cliffs to Mitchell's farm. The scramble is quite easy, and all told you won't have to walk half a mile. Mitchell and his wife will keep you safe and comfortable for the night, while I see the fun out with our friends."

"In the second case," remarked Enid, "you will lose your precious Blantyre. They'll release him."

"I'm afraid so," sighed Craven. "That is the weak spot in the scheme, and I did so much want to have an intimate little chat with him. However, it can't be helped, and perhaps," he concluded hopefully, "they won't follow us."

This uncertainty increased the interest with which they gazed through the rear windows of the wheel-house to watch the movements of their pursuers. The boats, though they looked small, being a considerable distance astern, were clearly visible, and eventually through his glasses Craven saw the larger boat tow the other out of the channel. For a moment or so it held on an indefinite course, as though its occupants were quite undecided what to do, and then unmistakably turned its bows in their direction and followed them steadily. Hampered by the tender, which probably did not tow well, its speed was little better than their own; but it would certainly overtake them when their spluttering engine gave up the struggle.

The protests of the latter were becoming more marked, and Craven tried the effect of juggling with

the controls to coax a little steadier running out of it. He was not particularly successful; indeed he once had to slip hurriedly into " free " to avoid stalling the engine altogether. Their plight must have been obvious from the first to their pursuers, who had thus been encouraged to resume the chase. However, Craven managed to reach the stranded German ship a good hundred yards ahead of them, and was delighted that the brilliant moonlight which had so aided him now ceased as the moon passed behind clouds again. Blantyre's friends would have to draw in to land more circumspectly, and so more slowly than he had done. He had five minutes' grace, if not more.

After the disappearance of the moon it was disconcertingly dark, and Craven was particularly glad he had rounded the stern of the ship while the light held good and had secured a glimpse of how she lay in relation to the foot of the cliff. It was also a great advantage that he had revisited the ship recently to watch the salvage operations. She lay about twenty feet clear of the honeycombed base of the cliff. Between the two was a stretch of water about five feet deep, which lazily strayed away up rocky channels into the mouths of the shallow caves—these were like doorways set in the foot of the cliff. One large block of rock lay like a platform within ten feet of the ship, and from it to the bulwark a ladder had been reared and lashed into place for the convenience of the salvage men. Craven ran his spluttering launch alongside the rock under the ladder, shut off the motor and made fast.

The girls quickly scrambled ashore, and by Craven's direction immediately made their way across the rocks into a large, low-arched cave to the left of the tramp steamer. Craven was about to follow suit when, as he stepped over Blantyre, he ran his head against a rope sling that most mysteriously was hanging out of the black sky over the launch. For a moment he was intensely puzzled, and then the explanation occurred

to him as he recollected the activities of the salvage men. They had raised the main derrick well up to the mast, and then swung it out to port over the ship's side; with the aid of this as a crane they had been hoisting their gear and supplies from the beach into the ship; the sling that dangled round Craven's head was attached to the hoisting tackle of the derrick.

All this passed through Craven's mind in a flash. It was succeeded by an amazing idea, which he always maintained was a genuine inspiration, but which others characterized as pure lunacy.

"Damn it," he decided, "Blantyre shan't get away with it; I'll gag him again, slip the sling round him and then haul him up to the end of the derrick and make fast. His gang will have a good game of hide and seek looking for him."

He whipped Blantyre's handkerchief out of his breast pocket, twisted it into a hard roll and tied it between his jaws and round his head. Then he untied him from the rail round the after deck. Grabbing the sling he threw his weight upon it; fortunately the end of the rope had not been made fast, and the rope ran slowly through the pulley blocks. Craven hauled away until the sling was low enough for him to hitch the rope round Blantyre's body. The resulting arrangement was unorthodox; but one loop encircled Blantyre's chest and another passed under his thighs to take his weight—the swiftly contrived jumble was quite secure. Craven sprang on to the rock, raced up the ladder that led across to the ship, and rushed to the rope of the hoisting tackle. As he did so he heard the motor-boat creeping slowly in and, the sound giving some indication of her whereabouts, he was able to pick her out as a dark blob on the water about fifty yards away. There was time, just time, for him to execute his mad trick. Seizing the rope he hauled madly at it; the pulley blocks made the task easy but slow. Blantyre, dimly seen, rose in the air, to be lost

finally against the dark sky; what seemed a wilderness of rope accumulated round Craven's legs. With great care he made the rope fast and kicked the slack out of the way of any possible searchers to whom it might have given a clue. His rubber-soled shoes padded at racing speed over the steel deck, pattered down the ladder, and before the motor-boat had rounded the stern of the steamer, Craven was safely out of sight within the arched cave entrance that sheltered Enid and Mabel. He glanced back for one moment and chuckled. Blantyre was absolutely invisible, for the night had gone dark; moreover there was sufficient noise from the surf and the creak of the ship's tackle to mask any faint noise he might make. Craven was prepared to bet money that Blantyre's friends would not find him, and that when he returned in about an hour his captive would still be there, slung 'twixt heaven and earth—whether he would be able to get him away would entirely depend on circumstances.

Feminine hands clutched at Craven, and a storm of expostulation was hissed into his ear in whispers. What did he mean by leaving them alone in that awful place? Did he really want them all to be captured?

Craven calmed them with apologies and led them to the back of the cave—making Mabel hold on to the back of his coat and Enid hold on to Mabel. When he reached the rock at the back, he turned left and carefully followed the natural walk for some twenty yards until he had passed round the bulge of the cliff. Then at last he ventured to switch on his lamp. A clear glimpse of the kind of place they were in served greatly to reassure the girls—in the darkness they had imagined it to be much worse.

In form, the run of the caves resembled a crude, natural cloister; the sea washed in between the pillars. It was not perfectly continuous along the base of the cliff and, in any case, there were several places where the floor fell away, and at these points there was fairly

deep water inside the caves. But a vast amount of fallen rock lay piled in the water outside the line of pillars and arches, and anyone who knew the place as well as Craven did could follow a comparatively easy track, now inside, now outside the caves, until he came to the point where a zigzag path worked its way up from water level to a break in the cliffs, and through this to the fields at the top.

Using his light only when inevitable, and then with the utmost caution, so that they did not betray their presence, he slowly piloted the girls along. Repeatedly he urged them in whispers to test each foothold before they trusted their weight to it—there was wet seaweed about, particularly that green, grass-like variety on which nobody can keep his feet. In the midst of his anxiety he trod on some himself and gave a practical demonstration of the result he feared—he fell flat on his back in a shallow pool, fortunately without hurting himself. In daylight, or if they could have used their torch freely, this part of the journey would have taken only ten minutes; as it was, it took twenty for them to reach the point where the zigzag started.

Craven paused here a moment to rest the girls; he found them a dry rock to sit on and even offered them cigarettes. He clearly felt fairly safe. They would not smoke; but he cautiously lit one himself. As he smoked he pointed out that the spot was one of nature's perfect booby-traps. The line of the arches stretched on ahead and they were higher and more open than any hitherto. The sea extended through the pillars to flood the floor, and incidentally to reflect light into the caves, which were lighter than those they had traversed. Skirting the back of the cavern was a delightfully unobstructed path, he assured them. The route indeed looked almost alluring, and Enid decided that, seen under different circumstances and by bright moonlight, it would probably be romantically beautiful. But, said Craven, to go ahead was to plunge into a cul-de-sac

which ended in a tangle of dangerous rocks and pools.

When they had rested he led them past the first pillar, which was so broad that the passage behind it might almost be described as a short tunnel. Instead of going ahead he hugged the pillar and clambered along the rocks at its base until they were through the next archway and in the open air, with the sea splashing on the rocks beneath their feet. He then showed them that on the outer face of the pillar was what amounted to a rough stair cut in the rock. Up this he sent first Enid and then Mabel, whose feet he guided from step to step—he had decided that neither in spirit nor physique had she the mettle of Enid; his opinion was biased, but to some extent justified.

They had now worked their way to the western end of the shallow cove in which the German steamer had stranded, and, had it been light, from their present vantage-point they would have had a good view of the vessel. As it was, all they could see was two flitting lights moving hither and thither on the beach.

"They've searched the ship without finding him and now they're trying the shore," said Craven with a malicious chuckle. "Poor old Blantyre, I bet he feels chilly. I told him not to knock about much as I didn't know but what the rope was half rotten."

"You are a brute," remarked Enid in reproof.

"Serve him right," was Mabel's opinion. "His men gathered me in without any consideration for my feelings. I'm not sorry for Blantyre."

"Come along to the farm, children," ordered Craven.

The path continued westward for seventy yards, and, in fact, passed directly over the stretch of caves they had viewed before leaving sea-level. Craven anxiously shepherded them lest they stumbled and rolled over the edge into the sea, a drop of about forty feet. After the path had started to climb up the gap there was no danger, and the only difficulty was the steepness, which

was made more noticeable by the loose stony surface. Five minutes of energetic scrambling brought them to the top, and a further walk of ten minutes along a lane which went straight inland at right-angles to the cliffs landed them at a small farm.

Here there was neither light nor sound, man and beast were alike asleep; but Craven, without hesitation or apparent compunction, hammered at the door. An upstairs window was pushed up with a bang, a head was thrust out into the night, and a gruff voice demanded who was there.

"Trevor Craven. Sorry to bother you, Mitchell, but I've struck a spot of bother. Take these two girls in and look after them for the night, will you?"

"Be down in a minute, sir, and the missus," the man assured him.

"His wife was my nurse," Craven told them. "They would both do anything for me, I think. Absolutely A 1 people."

In less than a minute the farmer and his wife were down. They lit the lamp, threw an armful of wood on the embers and started a roaring fire. In ten minutes there were hot drinks and the offer of homely but substantial food—cheese, meat, pickles, bread and butter. Once started, all three did justice to the fare.

Craven explained with discreet vagueness that he had fallen foul of a motor-boating party and would be glad if the Mitchells would take the two girls off his hands while he went back to settle the business. If they would do that, and see the girls on their way in the morning, he would be most obliged and would call round in a day or so to make the matter square with them.

They readily agreed, but were almost offended by the promise of payment. Surely he could let them do that for his friends when they owed so much to his kindness. Craven smiled on their indignation, which melted away. He made them promise to keep their mouths shut and do whatever the girls wanted in the morning.

With a word of apology to the others, he drew Mabel aside for a moment, and with a few swift questions made perfectly sure he had the main facts of her experience in the hands of Blantyre and his men.

"Leave it to me," he assured her finally. "I'll square your account and get that report back."

They rejoined the others.

"Don't worry about me for twenty-four hours," he said to Enid in a whisper. "If I can get our friend away, as I expect, I'll maroon him for half a day on one of the islets while I have a sleep. After that he'll talk. It will do him good to have a taste of his own medicine —I don't like people who kidnap girls. Look after yourself," and with a wave of his hand to them all he let himself out of the house and disappeared into the night.

"He must be made of iron," said Enid. "He's been on the go for hours and away he starts once more, as though he were just beginning."

"Ah, he's tough, no doubt, like all the Cravens," remarked Mitchell.

"And into the bargain," added his wife proudly, "he's a white-headed 'un; the white-headed Cravens was allus the best."

Mitchell grinned in sardonic reflection, evidently thinking of ancient tales concerning this family and its white-headed boys.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AT THE FARM

WHILE her visitors were finishing their meal, Mrs. Mitchell had hurriedly prepared a room for the girls, and, shortly after Craven had gone, she took them upstairs, announcing with motherly insistence that they must be dead beat.

Tired they certainly were, and the sight of the big double bed in the homely bedroom made them realize the fact all the more. But though the fresh, cool sheets of the bed were a caress to their tired bodies, the girls found that they were too excited to sleep immediately. Furthermore, in the hurry of their pursuit by the motorboats and escape up the cliff there had been no opportunity to exchange more than a few scraps of explanation to inform one another of all that had happened that night.

Mabel's concern, naturally, was for Coddington. Though she spoke disrespectfully of him, this flippancy was merely a pose to hide her affection. Enid told her in detail all that had happened at the tower, and how Coddington had driven away to enlist the aid of the local police to trace her, and, if necessary, to make the mulish Craven open his mouth. His failure to reappear was worrying; but they could not conceive how any serious trouble could possibly have befallen him. In the narrow country lanes he had to traverse it was absolutely impossible to drive fast, there was not anywhere a straight stretch of more than twenty yards. But each narrow lane had a ditch at either side, so what

had most probably happened was that in the darkness and his haste, Coddington had slipped his wheels into a ditch and stuck there. After he got out, if he did so, by the time he had found his constable, got back to the tower, and from there to Texemouth, he had so dropped out of the running that he had missed them completely.

"He'll be charging round like a bull and making the night hideous on Texemouth quay at this very moment," decided Mabel. "But he really is a dear old thing. I'll be kind to him when he gets back."

The account of Coddington's whirlwind prowess at the tower had pleasantly stirred that love of rude masculinity which lurked in her heart as in that of every woman. Enid was just as gratified by Craven's rescue of Mabel from the *Corsair*.

In response to Enid's questions, Mabel in turn explained what had happened to herself. After driving down the nail in the heel of her shoe and so restoring her powers of locomotion, she had strolled through the bushes on to the carriage track that ran down to the tower. Naturally Coddington and Enid were not to be seen on the track, and she realized that they would certainly not have used it, but would have plunged into the shelter of the brushwood on the hill-side in order to approach the tower unobserved.

She had no intention of following by the same route and attempting to catch them up; but she was curious to see if anything was happening, provided she could manage it without any great exertion. Accordingly, she clambered about three-quarters of the way up the hill-side, using the same rough track by which the three of them had first descended. From this point she could see the tower, the paths leading to it and the cars outside; but at the moment not a soul was in sight and the place might have been deserted. There were some bushes in front of her that would have obscured her view had she sat down, so she decided to work her way a little farther up the slope, through the bushes, until

she reached a clear point where she could sit down and watch. Such a place was not easy to find, and unconsciously she scrambled much farther than she intended in searching for a vantage-point. In fact she was only about fifty yards from the tower, which was well below her down the slope, when she slipped, crashed between two intermingling bushes and cannoned into two men who were engaged in the same furtive task of watching the tower.

One of them was the man whose reflection she had seen in the landing mirror when he seized her from behind in Coddington's house, and whom, as she had stated, she thought she had seen before. They immediately recognized each other. This would not have mattered; but by some mental trick her mind also contrived to remember where she had seen him before. In her surprise she cried out, "Oh, the man from the motor-boat at Texemouth!" He was the man who had leered at her when she had stood with her mother at Texemouth admiring the view of the harbour and gazing at the *Corsair*. He had landed from the *Corsair*, and obviously belonged to the boat.

No sooner had this remark passed her lips than the man clapped his hand over her mouth and pulled her down in the bushes. The two men tied her scarf across her mouth and held her by the arms while they decided what to do with her.

They found the situation extremely awkward. From their remarks she gathered that they regarded Craven as an enemy to be feared; he was at the tower with a number of men friends. Coddington, whom they recognized, had just gone that way, and now here was the one girl who could denounce them on her way to join the assembly of their enemies. If she escaped, in five minutes she would set the whole crowd after them and, what was worse, tell them of the *Corsair*, to which they were bound to return.

The man whom she had identified as belonging to

the *Corsair* was of the opinion that they should take her back with them. The other objected that there would be an immediate hue and cry, and that when they got her to Texemouth they would not know what to do with her. Her principal enemy was a man of some intelligence; he decided they should cut Craven's telephone wire to prevent an immediate widespread alarm, and that she should go back with them, since the Boss—presumably Blantyre—had a wonderful way with women and could probably persuade her to keep her mouth shut. Anyway, it was up to him. He had sent them snooping round Craven's place and this was the result. He could not blame them.

Thereupon they dragged her to her feet, and twisting her arms behind her, forced her to clamber up the rest of the slope. At the top, behind a furze brake and not far from where Coddington had first stopped, the two men had a saloon car hidden. They pushed Mabel into the back of the car and forced her to lie on the floor; one man stayed with her, the other drove. In this fashion they arrived in Texemouth and drove right down to the end of the harbour road, beyond the pier and below where the *Corsair* was lying. There was not a soul about.

The driver left the car and went aboard the *Corsair*. He was away ten minutes, and when he returned brought the yacht's tender alongside the rocks at the end of the road. His face was gloomy and his news was that the Boss was not aboard. Some pal must have called for him and taken him for a booze on one of the other yachts, of which there were several in the harbour.

"In for a penny, in for a pound," said the leader of the two. "We'll take her aboard and stow her in the little after cabin till he comes. We daren't let her go. The Boss will have to shut her mouth somehow."

This they did, and it was not till late that Blantyre returned. The men's surmise had been right. A friend had called and taken him away for a carouse, and

now returned with him. Both, from their noise, were slightly drunk; Blantyre was bent on returning his friend's hospitality and sent his two men scurrying to fulfil half a score of orders for drink, food and smokes. They had no opportunity to get him by himself and explain the presence of the unwelcome guest in the after cabin.

Finally, in pursuit of some whim of his own, and when he was well lit up with drink, he had blundered into the after cabin and discovered her presence for himself. He was surprised, but too far gone to think. In fact, his muddled brain had been immediately swept by a crazy joy—some touch of the frenzy that must stir the soul of a departed Mohammedan when, in the Prophet's paradise, he sights his first houri. Fortunately, a few moments after, Craven arrived and trussed him up with the mooring-line.

"I like that man," concluded Mabel. "I didn't know him, but I was never so glad to see anyone in my life—he looked so clean, windswept and decent. I knew I was safe. Are you going to marry him?" she wound up with inconsequential suddenness.

"Of course not," declared Enid. "We're friends. He's never asked me. I only know him because he's my employer."

"Stuff! " declared Mabel in impolite disbelief. "You are both of you past that stage. In any case, my dear, if Craven tries to grab you, don't run away too fast —just a nice pace, so that he can catch you easily. You'll find him delightful."

This abrupt declaration broke off the flow of their conversation, and, after a few further exchanges which soon petered out, by mutual consent they agreed they were tired and would go to sleep.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE SETTLEMENT

THE food and hot drink had refreshed Craven, and now the girls were safely off his hands he felt so unhampered that he returned with adventurous zest to the seashore; he was determined to recover his boat and carry away Blantyre to be dealt with at leisure. His long, swinging stride bore him quickly down the lane, and, sliding and scrambling, he descended the gap in a fifth of the time he and the girls had taken to ascend. Once on the edge of the cliff he proceeded, however, with great caution, for not only was the path dangerous, but, also, he had no idea at what point he would encounter Blantyre's three supporters.

He had scarcely gone twenty yards when, to his surprise, he heard voices. Pulling up instantly, he listened and found the speakers were immediately below him by the sea. Lying down, he thrust his head and shoulders over the cliff edge. He was immediately above one of the arched entrances to the line of sea caves, and, scrambling over the rocks at the edge of deep water, were the three men whose whereabouts he had been so anxious to discover. To find them there was more than he had hoped for. While he had been escorting the girls to the farm, with amazing persistence the three had worked their way round the shallow cove from the wreck. Their persistence probably had more than one explanation—the two employees were presumably afraid to do less than their best to rescue "the Boss," while Blantyre's friend, in addition, may have

felt he had a personal score to settle with Craven. However it was, their zeal had landed them in difficulties, for, having no expert knowledge of the cliffs, they had inevitably overshot the point where one left the caves to climb the cliffs, and had been lured into the seemingly easy stretch which, as Craven had explained to the girls, was a booby trap ending in a tangled cul-de-sac of rocks and deep water.

The three were just realizing that they had failed in their search. Blantyre's friend—his name appeared to be Goring—had so far taken the lead, it seemed; the other two were now becoming somewhat querulously critical of his direction.

"This is no go, Mr. Goring," objected one. "That there Craven couldn't have got along here with two girls; not to mention Mr. Blantyre, who wouldn't move willingly."

"Then where is he?" snarled Goring, whose temper was evidently wearing thin. "We've searched that ship and the far strip of beach, and now we've searched these caves. You can't overlook four people in a narrow alley of a place like this."

"There must be a secret way out," suggested the other man, "a smuggler's passage."

"Hell to that for poppycock," shouted Goring, thoroughly exasperated. "I don't believe there ever was a smuggler's secret passage outside a book."

"Well anyhow," retorted the man, "whichever way they have gone, we can't go any farther along here. It ain't even safe to try swimming."

This was so obviously true that Goring could not gainsay it; after shuffling about, grumbling and swearing as he flashed his light hither and thither, he ungraciously agreed that they should return. They had only one electric lamp now in service, the other presumably having run down. Goring held the light while his two companions gingerly clambered down and across a slimy rock gully that shelved rapidly to deep water.

When they were across he prepared to follow; he moved very slowly, obviously not liking the look and feel of the place, which was slimy with green weed.

"Be careful how you come, sir," they called. "Mind you don't drop the lamp."

The implications of this last remark annoyed Goring.

"Shut up," he shouted. "I can look after myself if you can't," and he proceeded to negotiate the slope of green weed.

The spectacle of their difficulties had been meat and drink to Craven as he lay on the cliff edge above them, and the possibilities of the situation were not lost on him. Close to his right hand was a small boulder about as big as a bucket and weighing probably half a hundredweight. He waited until Goring was thoroughly committed to his delicate descent and then, with one strong push, toppled the boulder over—the overhang of the cliff made it absolutely impossible for the rock to hit Goring. It fell, in fact, slightly in front of him a yard to his right, blinded him with water and so startled him that, with a yell, he completely lost his footing and tobogganed down the slope on his back. His impetus shot him straight across the shallow end of the pool at the bottom and he cannoned into the other two, who grabbed him and so saved him from sliding into deep water.

But that fate had befallen his lamp. Craven saw it slide down the gully, its light still burning and looking mysteriously green through the water, until it toppled over the edge and vanished in the depths.

From the cave mouth came a babel of curses, outcry and explanation from the three men. It died down after a time, and then one of them summed up the situation with a question:

"And how the —— are we going to get out of here without a light?"

"Exactly," muttered Craven with sardonic complacency.

Getting to his feet, he quickly made his way along the rest of the cliff path, descended the natural stairway in the face of the pillar, and was in the caves himself before the other three had advanced ten yards. He could hear them scrambling, stumbling and cursing in the darkness, and estimated he had a clear start of about forty yards. With the advantages of his knowledge and his lamp, he would certainly reach the boats an hour before they did at their present rate of progress, and the chances were that they would have to abandon the attempt and wait for daylight.

Craven made the rest of the journey without misadventure or delay, and without being too preoccupied to think out the details of what he had best do. He did not make the mistake of underrating his adversaries, and he first tested their larger boat to see if it would start; the small tender, he knew, must be still useless, as they had not had time to free the propellor from the rope. As he had feared, the launch would not start; there was a patent switch in the ignition system to baffle thieves; this switch was thrown out and the key removed. This explained, of course, why Goring had left the boat unguarded while they made their search. His caution had not extended, however, to locking the hatch covers over the engine, which was roomily housed aft of the cockpit. Craven lifted them and ruthlessly cut all the six leads to the sparking plugs. Could he have started her he would have towed the other two boats away from the shore and at leisure got his own launch going again. In the circumstances he would have to utilize his own launch. He did not suppose that now she had cooled the defaulting engine would start up again, but on the deck of the German tramp steamer he had noticed an odd oar lying under the bulwarks, and thought that with that he could make shift to scull his launch a safe distance from the shore. To avoid the necessity of returning, obviously the first business was to re-ship Blantyre. The launch had not changed her position

with the movement of the tide and was just right to receive him again. Craven ran up the ladder and boarded the ship. He had been right; there was the odd oar lying on the after deck, and it was, moreover, in good condition. With swift fingers he cast loose the rope of the hoisting tackle and allowed it to run over the sheaves. Scarcely three yards of rope had run out before it jammed somewhere and stopped. His end of the rope was free; the trouble was evidently in the pulley itself. He hauled at the rope in the expectation of freeing it, but after about a foot had come in, it jammed again. He pulled and shook and jerked it to no purpose; it remained immovable either way.

Craven cursed in his exasperation; greater but expected difficulties he would have faced with equanimity, but this casual triviality enraged him. Everything had gone marvellously, and now the run of luck was spoiled because Blantyre was hauled up at the derrick end and could not be got down. It was absurd; there he hung in the darkness, helpless as a side of beef. Every minute was precious to Craven, but he realized that he must release the man, for the results of the night's exposure in that position might be serious. In addition, of course, he wanted to take Blantyre with him.

Fortunately Craven was as active as a cat and had a perfectly steady head when at a height. He ran up the ratlines to the look-out at the mast head. From here he climbed on to the hoist rope that held the derrick aloft and, swinging along it, got to the end of the derrick from which the recalcitrant pulley block and the helpless Blantyre hung. Sliding down, he stood with his feet on the lower set of sheaves and proceeded to examine the six turns of rope that passed over the two sets of sheaves—three at the top and three at the bottom. He swayed to and fro as he did this; the tackle creaked; the night breeze hummed gently among the guy ropes and stirred his hair with its chill breath.

Craven was not nervous, but he certainly was not enjoying himself. With the aid of his torch he located the trouble—the whole set of pulley blocks was worn and a piece had been broken out of the side of one of the sheaves; the rope had consequently jumped out of the groove and jammed between the sheave and the shell of the whole block. Craven eventually worked the rope free, but the final successful wrench required all his strength and cost him a considerable quantity of skin from his fingers.

The immediate result of freeing the rope was so surprising that for a moment Craven was staggered—the bottom block, under the weight of Blantyre and himself, began swiftly to descend amid a wild whirring of the sheaves within the shell. Either he had, in his annoyance, forgotten to make fast the rope of the hoisting tackle, or it had come loose. Down they went, both going at increasing speed. The ropes to which Craven clung tore through and past his hands, some up, some down. In a flash he realized what he must do: he passed his arms round the six strands of rope that connected the two blocks and tightly hugged them to him. The ropes tore and sawed at his clothes; but his hug proved an effective brake and the speed first steadied and then definitely slackened. Blantyre landed on the after deck of the launch with a reasonably moderated thud, and by a great effort Craven managed to sway aside and land without treading on his face. Craven gave a gasp of relief; it had been a bad moment; he passed his hand mechanically across his forehead and found it wet with sweat. When he switched on his lamp—it had been in his pocket during his unpremeditated descent—he found that Blantyre, too, looked rather ghastly. He freed him from the rope slings, which he flung over the side of his own boat into the yacht tender alongside, and then tried to start up the launch. The electric starter whirred; but the engine fired so badly that it could not pick up; it gave a couple

of vicious "back-fires" in the exhaust manifold and stopped.

Craven hurried aboard the steamer again, secured the oar, and with this proceeded first to thrust and then laboriously to scull the launch away from the land. He had to take her fifty yards to be safely clear of all outlying rocks, and the effort cost him a wet shirt. To his relief he found that the flood tide had ceased to make, so that he was not likely to be called upon for much effort to keep the boat off shore, and in a short time the ebb would begin to draw him clear, even if by that time he had not got his engine going.

For his own sake Craven now bestowed a little attention on Blantyre, who was grey with fright and cold. He dragged him inside the wheel-house, pulled the gag out of his mouth, slackened his bonds, and poured some rum and water down his throat as he sat propped up in the corner. The colour began to strain back into his face, and he mastered sufficient energy to groan with prolonged intensity. This thoroughly satisfied Craven, who forthwith abandoned him and turned to his engine.

Opening the hatch in the floor of the wheel-house, he got down to the engine and removed the six sparking plugs—they were filthy, so he had little fear that his diagnosis of the trouble was incorrect. In such cases he knew that the first trouble was the least, and that a scamped job usually had to be done again. He took each plug to pieces, patiently cleaned all the parts, and reassembled them. The whole business took him nearly an hour, though he worked his hardest.

He was amply repaid, however, when at the first touch of the starter the engine burst into life and purred like a well-fed cat. Its quiet vibration was a joy to the ear. Having closed the hatch in the floor, he was about to start the launch on her return trip when a flicker of light at the foot of the cliff caught his eye. He opened one of the windows and listened. Goring and the other two had somehow got back, and, having found a few

matches, were striking them to inspect the crippled launch, and expressing in lurid language their appreciation of the damage. It was music to Craven's ears. The light of a few matches would not enable them to repair the ignition wiring or free the propellors of the other boat; they would have to wait for day. It suddenly occurred to Craven that he had no idea of the time. He glanced at his watch; it was 3.30 a.m.

"What a night!" he muttered as he thrust the control lever forward and gave the engine more throttle. At two-thirds speed he leisurely stood on a course that would work away from the land and at the same time take him westward along the coast.

He gave Blantyre another drink of rum and had one himself.

"Well, Blantyre," he said at length, "now we can have a little chat."

"What about?" demanded the other sullenly, and with considerable misgiving in his voice.

"Just a few points of information I want from you," Craven told him. "I'll run over them on my fingers and tell you how I want you to present your information.

"One: a confession of how you abused my confidence over Ngamya Goldfields Ltd., and a list of the 'rabbits' you commissioned to hold 'our' shares.

"Two: a confession of how you had Coddington's report stolen and Miss Renshaw kidnapped.

"Three: an authorization for me to collect the copy of Coddington's report, wherever it is."

"You'll not get a word out of me," Blantyre declared.

"Oh, yes, I shall," said Craven, in a tone of easy assurance.

"Not if you hang me from that bloody tower of yours," vowed the other furiously, a slight froth showing on his snarling lips.

"Now! Now!" said Craven reprovingly. "That really is too obvious to be worthy of you, my dear

Blantyre. In that case you would, of course, be dead, and your glad voice for ever stilled. But as it happens I'm not taking you to my bloody tower, I've a much better place, a lonely islet out at sea, where none ever comes except the gulls and the sea wind and the little crabs out of the sea. You know the sort of place. I shall land you there, back away into deep waters, cook my breakfast, eat it with great content, and have a well-earned sleep. You will contemplate the beauty of sea and sky, the peace of nature will tranquillize your soul, and when I wake up I think you'll talk. But don't go to sleep yourself, the gulls would probably mistake you for a corpse and pick your eyes out—an innocent mistake, but unpleasant."

Blantyre glared at him savagely, but remained silent. Craven had nothing further to say, and left him to digest the requirements that had been presented to him. There was no sound in the wheel-house except the steady throb of the motor: outside, the waves licked lazily at the boat as it passed, and the sky began to lighten with the coming of dawn.

Craven was half a mile out to sea when he passed Hutton Creek and, still edging slowly out, he worked down the coast for another three miles until, to Blantyre's horror, the islet materialized. Blantyre had not believed Craven. He was further convinced when Craven gently beached the launch on a tiny semi-circle of shingle, backed by a wall of smooth rock twenty feet high, and rudely marooned him. The only relief to his condition was that his bonds were cut and he could move about to ease the stiffness of his limbs. But as a set-off to this he found the early morning air very raw after the shelter of the wheel-house. The comforting warmth which the rum had planted at the pit of his stomach had, too, long since passed away.

Craven knew that Blantyre could not swim, so he contented himself with backing away about thirty feet and anchoring in eight feet of water. The ebbing tide

swung the launch on her cable away from the islet. Thus relieved of all worry concerning his captive, Craven proceeded to prepare breakfast for himself. The provisions Enid had stacked on the shelves were untouched, except for the slight meal they had made running into Texemouth harbour the night before. But two further discoveries heartened him still more. One was coffee; the other a greater prize. He poked his head through the little hatch of the galley forward and called to Blantyre.

"What do you think of that, my son? Pork and beans. Have you ever tried the effect of pork and beans on the human system at the hungry hour of dawn? One of the fifty-seven genuine varieties wherewith old H. J. tempts the jaded appetites of earth's sons. Say, boy, keep awake a little longer to smell the doings."

Blantyre glowered in silence and continued to clump up and down the strip of shingle to keep his circulation going—a vain endeavour without food; he got colder and more depressed every moment. Craven's head disappeared again into the galley, and he continued his happy task. He was no mean cook, and in a quarter of an hour he sat down to an appetizing meal of pork and beans on toast, plus hot coffee laced with rum. Gourmets may shudder; but yachtsmen will understand. The odour of the "doings" reached Blantyre on his rock and made him slaver with longing. As Craven was finishing his breakfast he was reduced to the pitch of trying to argue with him.

"It's no use being obstinate for the sake of humiliating me, Craven. You know quite well that enforced confessions, not even properly witnessed, are quite valueless."

"Do to carry round the City to show to your pals," rejoined Craven, in a pause of his mastication. "Make interesting reading for them. You'd never be able to show your face in your old haunts again." He took a

hearty drink of coffee out of a mug and then continued, "As for the copy of Coddington's report, I'm going to get your confession about that and recover the copy, if only because I was myself accused of lifting it."

Eventually Blantyre capitulated; but Craven would not relent to the extent of a crumb of food until he had written down all the stipulated statements on a scribbling-block Craven produced from one of the lockers in the launch. After he had read them through and noted they were duly signed, he fed Blantyre generously, and even lent him his lined mackintosh to keep him warm. He told him he would have to stay there till he had recovered the copy of the report, which Blantyre declared was on the *Corsair* and easily accessible. With a full stomach Blantyre did not care; he gave all particulars of how to find it and handed over his bunch of keys. Rolling the mackintosh round him, he snuggled down in a sheltered corner and told Craven to hurry up, as he did not want to stay there all day, even if it was going to be beautifully warm.

This remark and the obvious preparations for sleep nettled Craven.

"Not so fast," he remarked. "You started the trouble, and I'm not going to kill myself with lack of sleep to please you. It's only seven o'clock; I'm going to have a nap myself for an hour."

He dozed off and so did Blantyre. It was twelve o'clock when he awoke, and for the moment he could not understand where on earth he was, nor remember what had happened. Blantyre was still fast asleep in his sunny corner.

Craven shouted to him; threw him out some food and hurriedly got away. The delay annoyed him; by the time he had put the affair through the whole day would be spoiled. When he had the launch settled on her course, he lashed the wheel and, hauling a bucket of sea-water aboard, sluiced himself down to his waist as a refresher. He still felt frightfully sleepy despite his

rest. The wash did him good, and his wits were soon alert, speculating as to what sort of reception awaited him on the *Corsair*. As it turned out, he was not received at all. There was no one on deck when he sighted the cruiser; he ran unobtrusively alongside, made fast and boarded her, still without seeing anyone. On investigation he found her locked up at every point and deserted. There was a matter for future thought in this; at the moment he did not delay, but produced Blantyre's keys and went below. In his hunger and depression, Blantyre had apparently not lied; without difficulty, Craven found the copy of the report where Blantyre had said, in a small locker in the saloon. Locking everything up as he had found it, Craven boarded his own boat and was under way again within five minutes of his arrival. To come and go thus unquestioned suited him. Last night's events must have made many people in Texemouth curious; the normal itch of the police to be in the know had probably been raised to fever heat, and he might easily have encountered a most uncomfortable cross-examination. He thought himself lucky. Blantyre's two men, he decided, had probably bolted. The brief glimpse he had of the harbour suggested that the disappearance of the old warehouse had greatly improved the appearance of the waterfront, and he felt that for his own share in last night's proceedings the town should be grateful.

Craven was asking for no more trouble through over-oiling of the engine at top speed and consequent sooting up of plugs; he ran at an easy speed throughout the whole trip, and it was nearly three o'clock when he got back to Blantyre. In preparation for his transportation, Craven had borrowed a spare dinghy which was moored alongside the *Corsair*, and which, bearing, too, the name *Corsair*, he had safely presumed was Blantyre's property. He ordered Blantyre into this and towed him to the nearest village on the mainland. This procedure avoided the necessity of tying him up to

prevent any attack while he was aboard the launch. Craven landed him at the little fishing-village of Martelsea at 3.30 in the afternoon.

Blantyre dragged his boat up the beach clear of the surf, and, turning, morosely regarded Craven, who, with his engine in reverse, was drawing away from the shore.

"See you again," he called. "It's war to the knife between us after this."

"As you please," said Craven carelessly. "Anything you like except friendship. I should draw the line at that." He put his engine ahead and leisurely bore away up the coast to Hutton Creek.

Craven ran his launch into the boat-house and locked up. As he strolled to the tower it was 4.15 by his watch. Before he could enter he was met by his nearest neighbours, the Bruntons, a small farmer and his wife. Their tiny farm overlooked the creek, and they had seen him come in, though the sight seemed too good to be true. Craven had endeared himself to them, as he had to many more plain, simple people.

"Eh, we're glad to see you back, Mr. Craven; we thought you was gone for good," cried the good dame.

"Why should you?" asked Craven, who had never given any thought to how his absence might be interpreted by anyone who noticed it.

"But we've had the police here," cried the man, "a motor-car with two leddies, and then a newspaper man in another. They made a great stir about finding the wreck of your car up the creek at the cliff bottom, and have had Will Roberts and Tom Green out in their boats looking for your body."

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Craven, "I'm going to be a celebrity. I wonder what imbecile put the newspapers on the job. But they can get on with it, I shan't announce my return from the dead in order to prevent their making fools of themselves. But tell Roberts and

Green I'm all right, and that they are to come round for a drink, will you, Brunton?"

"Right, sir," agreed the man.

"But just a minute," said Craven, harking back to a previous point. "I don't understand the police thinking I was killed. I should have expected them to arrive with a Mr. Coddington in order to interview me on business."

Brunton shook his head emphatically. "I talked to P.C. Smith myself, sir, and he didn't give me the impression of wanting to see you on business. But he did mention a Mr. Coddington, and said the gentleman had tried to find him late last night, but couldn't. He had left a message with Mrs. Smith at the station, but he talked so much that all she could make out was that there was something badly wrong with Mr. Craven at the tower. So Smith came along as soon as he could."

"What happened to Mr. Coddington?"

"Don't know, sir. No further mention of him by anyone."

"Humph!" grunted Craven. "That's queer. We'll have to wait and see."

"Is there anything wants doing in the house, Mr. Craven?" asked the farmer's wife. "You'll need some food getting in, and there ought to be a dinner cooked for you this evening. It's awkward your man being away."

"It is awkward," admitted Craven, "but I don't like troubling you. You have your own house and farm to look after, and I'm so much in your debt already that my position is getting hopeless."

They would not heed his protests. Mrs. Brunton took stock of the larder, and told her husband what to send down from the farm in the way of provisions. She would wait till this stock came, and in the meantime put the place to rights. Mr. Craven should have a respectable dinner or she would know the reason

why. Craven blessed them both and went upstairs to shave. As soon as there was hot water he would get a bath. The re-establishment of the domestic routine occupied the next hour or so. Some tea was produced for him at five o'clock, and at seven an excellent dinner.

Craven felt at peace with all the world. He tried his phone, but found it still useless, so he could not ring up either the Coddingtons or the Renshaws. Mabel and Enid were all right, at any rate, and Coddington was big enough to look after himself, so he felt no inclination to worry.

The thought of Coddington reminded him of the copy of the report he had recovered from the *Corsair*. He had jammed it into the pocket of his coat and left it upstairs when he changed. He fetched it and, dropping into a comfortable chair, spent the rest of the evening studying it and making notes. Many a time he had longed to know what was in it, and he read it now with especial zest because it was still the sacred property of the Government, and to be read only by the mandarins of Whitehall.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A BRAIN-WAVE

At Mitchell's farm, after the girls stopped talking to one another, Mabel soon fell asleep; but Enid could not manage to do so and seemed more wide awake than ever. Although she would not have admitted the fact even to herself, Enid was pleased that Mabel liked Trevor Craven; she decided, however, that anything more preposterous than Mabel's advice could not be imagined—she had not the slightest intention of luring Craven by calculated retreat before his advances; she was no man-hunter. She would not stoop to such practices even if she wanted the man, and she certainly did not, although she had liked working with him, had enjoyed knocking about in his company, and had found this last episode she had shared with him most exciting. So ran the current of her thoughts after she had stopped talking with Mabel. Her mind had not yet sufficiently worked off its excitement for her to fall asleep, and she continued to churn over in her thoughts the main episodes of her acquaintance with Craven and the chief points of her present situation. But although her thoughts gradually slowed down and she became sleepy, her mind had done more than make a desultory round of its recent experiences; unconsciously it had been probing, weighing and groping towards conclusions. Enid suddenly realized that she was beset by the vague thought of something not done that might

have been done, by dissatisfaction because a great possibility had been missed. Her sleepy mind wearily made its round once more, asking what chance had been missed, and who had missed it. She was on the very verge of drifting into sleep when realization burst upon her, and in a flash she was wide awake again and sitting up.

"My stars!" she ejaculated softly, "that's it. What an idea! Why ever couldn't I think of it before Craven went?" In her fresh excitement she slipped out of bed and lit first the candle and then a cigarette, quite careless of whether she disturbed Mabel or not. She sat on the side of the bed and wondered. The time was a little after two in the morning; if she was to do anything she had to set to work immediately—there was no time to wait for Craven, and to hunt for him was hopeless. Dare she do it? Craven had left the helm of affairs unattended. Should she take charge and steer into the mad race of opportunity? Craven had planned the course, he had calculated the risk, and it so happened that during his absence she could make the final move with far greater effectiveness than he could ever do. She decided she would chance it.

Hurriedly she dressed and, leaving Mabel sleeping like a log, hurried on to the landing to tap at the door of the room where Mitchell and his wife slept. They had not quite gone to sleep again and immediately answered her tap, wondering what further could be troubling their strange guests.

"I have just thought of some business that must be attended to," Enid told them. "How far is it to the nearest telephone call-box?"

"Half a mile up the road to the village," the man said sleepily.

"And where can I get an early train for London?" she demanded, with the inexorable ruthlessness of a creature born to need no sleep.

"Lord ha' mercy, miss. There's a slow train through about three; but you'll have to go to Nidston to get it, and that's near seven mile away."

"It will have to be done," stated Enid. "Has anyone round here got a car I can hire?"

Mitchell scratched his grizzled head in perplexity. As he confessed later to his wife, he felt kind o' responsible for this young gal to Mr. Craven, and thought he didn't ought to encourage her to go gallivanting off at that hour in the morning all by herself.

But "the young gal" was more than a match for him, and extracted the reluctant admission that he himself had an old car which might be coaxed into motion. Forthwith she had him dress and proceed to exercise his powers of persuasion on the car. Before the fumes of sleep were cleared completely from his brain, Mitchell found himself driving his old Morris through the chilly lanes in the darkness of early morning, "the young gal" sitting beside him and urging him to hurry. Before starting she had got him to change a pound note, and when they arrived at the telephone call-box she proceeded to get through first to the local exchange and then to London, where she had given the numbers of the *National Echo*.

She got through in eight minutes and demanded to speak with the assistant editor, Hallam. In another minute she was switched over to him.

"Enid Petersham speaking," she called. "Is that you, Hallam?"

"Yes," the far-off voice assured her, "it is. What's the matter with you? Been run in and want me to bail you out?"

"No," she said; "don't be funny. How are you off for news? Have you plenty or do you want some?" From her manner it was evident that the assistant editor and herself were friends of very long standing.

"Spill it, my dear, spill it," urged Hallam. "If

you've anything worth printing we can just get it into the morning issue and it will be the only good thing there. The issue's tripe, though I say it as shouldn't."

"Listen, then," admonished Enid, "and don't interrupt. I'm on my way to catch the train to town from Nidston, but have just time to give you the facts. Trevor Craven, who owns our paper, has disappeared. His Rolls Royce, for no apparent reason, has gone over the edge of the cliff. His week-end place, the tower, is deserted, the valet having been sent away beforehand. People will soon be asking why and looking for Craven floating in Hutton Creek. Shut up; don't interrupt! Eight miles away, at Texemouth, Blantyre, Craven's one-time business associate, has disappeared from his motor-yacht *Corsair*, and his men have been hunting along the coast for him without success. There have been some queer doings at Texemouth, for a woman was hustled on and off the yacht and finally disappeared in a launch. An old warehouse was burnt out, too, on the quayside, but that may be mere coincidence."

"What's the connection between the two men?" asked Hallam.

"Now you're asking something," Enid told him. "If I put you wise you won't let on it was me."

"No," vowed Hallam, "you can trust me. I'm not a fool."

"Well," said Enid with mysterious solemnity, "they are both interested to an unknown extent in gold-mining shares, particularly in Ngamya Goldfields Ltd. There's been so much talk of that company recently that even you people on your rotten paper must have heard of it. You can draw your own conclusions."

Hallam whistled *sotto voce* to express his surprise and interest.

"That's the goods," he announced with journalistic

fervour. "That last fact puts spice into the tale. It will write up well."

"Don't forget the setting," Enid advised him. "Picturesque harbour at Texemouth, lonely tower at Hutton Creek, search beneath beetling cliffs, etc. By the by, there is a ship ashore just where they are searching for Blantyre, if that touch is worth anything. They're salvaging it. Caves, too, in the foot of the cliffs."

"I'll do justice to the setting," said Hallam; "I know the coast a bit. One look at a good map and I'll have it all fresh again. But you are sure of your facts and you're not spoofing me, are you?"

"The facts are O.K.," Enid assured him, "but future developments are not guaranteed, and especially I accept no responsibility for the construction you put on the facts; I've read your sensational tripe before. In fact, although we've been pals, I hesitated whether I ought to let you in on it, knowing how your paper has stuff written up."

"Cheerio," called Hallam; "many thanks. Stand you a drink when I see you," and he rang off.

Enid felt that she had begun well. If a wild tale could stampede a section of the share market, then the *National Echo* would certainly succeed, especially as Blantyre would not be there to steady his associates and, in fact, would be presumed dead. She hurriedly got in Mitchell's old car, and once more they ground their way through the darkness. They reached Nidston at five to three. Enid thanked Mitchell and apologized for not being able to pay him—beyond her fare she had scarcely any money, and book again she had to, for her return ticket was at the Renshaws'. The generous old fellow assured her that she was no wise in his debt; it had been a pleasure to help her, especially as she was a friend of Mr. Craven's. The train clattered in, two-thirds of it consisting of milk vans. Enid asked the guard to waken her, if necessary, at the junction where she got the fast

train for London, clambered into an empty third-class smoker, and prepared to sleep. She was already dead tired and she knew the train journey would be only an interlude in a strenuous day. When the guard glanced into her compartment at the next stop she was fast asleep, so he locked the door to ensure her being safe and undisturbed till the train reached the junction. He was a fatherly man and, like old Mitchell, was very doubtful about girls gallivanting across the country in the small hours of the morning by themselves.

Enid duly changed into the fast train, thanks to the old guard, who woke her up and conducted her across the platform himself—he was like a kindly genie seen dimly in a weary dream. Despite the better speed of this second train, the journey as a whole was a lamentable experience—it was almost nine o'clock when she got into Victoria Station. She had only sixpence left, and this, acting on the kill or cure principle, she expended upon strong coffee at the railway buffet. Her luck held and she revived. Taking a taxi, she drove straight to the office and raided the petty-cash box for her fare. This done, she sent one of the typists out to buy her something for breakfast and the office boy to get a copy of the *National Echo*.

She enjoyed both; but the *National Echo* was distinctly the more exciting fare and at times made her forget to eat. Hallam had done the job really well, she thought. She was confirmed in this opinion when Tubby Burton arrived at 9.30. His eyes were bulging like organ stops with consternation.

"My God, isn't this terrible?" he gasped, sinking into a chair.

"I've only just glanced at it," said Enid. "I haven't had time to digest it. Do you think it's serious?"

Tubby nearly choked with emotion. "Do I think it's serious? Well, look at it!" And he spread the paper out and with a podgy forefinger directed Enid's

attention to the more lurid facts and surmises. First were the flaring headlines:

FEARED TRAGEDIES ON SOUTH COAST

MYSTERIOUS FATES OF TWO WELL-KNOWN FINANCIERS, TREVOR CRAVEN AND A. J. BLANTYRE

IS THERE A CONNECTION? RE-ECHO OF NGAMYA GOLDFIELDS SCANDAL

Then followed a photo of Craven, probably secured when he was in the divorce court, and one of Blantyre, who seemed to be posing as a tailor's model in yachting rig-out. After this came two columns of newsprint. As it was expected of her, Enid played her part and followed from point to point, as Tubby's finger directed, and listened as he hurriedly read aloud in an excited, gabbling voice:

"'Last night on the south coast the concluding hours of peacefulness were rudely shattered at two places by what is feared will prove dire tragedies, whose reverberations may ultimately be felt in many homes. . . .

"'At Hutton Creek is the week-end cottage of Trevor Craven, in reality a renovated tower, all that remains of the old fortified family seat. . . . His valet had been sent away and Mr. Craven was in residence alone. He went out in his car and failed to return. It was later found dashed to pieces at the foot of a high cliff along the edge of which the road to and from the tower passes. The road is not dangerous except to careless strangers and was very familiar to Mr. Craven, so that it is difficult to conceive what accident could have sent his Rolls Royce hurtling over the edge. A seizure seems equally out of the question, for Mr. Craven was a young man of magnificent health and physique.

"'The unfortunate fact remains that the gentleman has not since been seen, and his friends naturally fear that his mutilated remains are to be sought for within

the waters of Hutton Creek, by which and on which he spent so many happy hours. . . .' "

"Terrible!" gasped Enid, feeling that this was an appropriate place to shed one of the several comments clearly required from her.

"It is," agreed Tubby lugubriously, "but don't let it upset you. You know him better than I do, of course, so you'll feel it more. But it's no good taking on about it. You look pale; shall I get you a drink?"

"No, I'll be all right," said Enid, and, afraid lest she should begin to grin, she bent low over the paper.

Tubby accordingly continued:

"'All yesterday at Texemouth the fine motor-yacht *Corsair*, belonging to A. J. Blantyre, lay anchored amid the great natural beauty which makes the spot a Mecca to the yachtsmen of our south coast. There was a certain amount of hurry in the way the tenders went to and fro between the yacht and shore, and the agitation of one lady, both on her arrival and departure, perhaps made her a little conspicuous; but there was really nothing to indicate the tragedy that was impending. It was suddenly discovered late in the evening that Mr. Blantyre had left the yacht and gone along the coast in a launch. Something inexplicable and sinister in the proceeding induced his men to follow their master, though without orders. Despite the distraction of a fire which broke out ashore and gutted a warehouse, they made the search and found the launch abandoned, but no sign of their employer. Their agitation of mind was doubtless increased by the forbidding aspect of the scene of the tragedy at the foot of beetling cliffs, whose base has been fretted away and honeycombed into caves by the eroding sea. It is a ships' graveyard, and a recent but more fortunate victim lies there at the moment—a stranded steamer that may possibly be salvaged.

"'The actual spot of this feared second tragedy is only about four miles from Hutton Creek, and natural

speculation as to whether there could be any possible connection between the two tragedies is increased when one remembers that the two men were formerly business associates——' "

" Were they? " asked Enid innocently.

" I dunno," grunted Tubby and read on:

" ' ——to the last these financiers had one thing in common, a very considerable interest—probably far greater than was ever known or suspected by the public —in African gold-mining companies, particularly in the concern registered as Ngamya Goldfields Ltd. The rumours so prevalent lately concerning this company, and the uproar in Parliament over a supposed scandal in the administration of the region, will recur to every-one's mind, and so lend an additional piquancy to the mystery that enshrouds the possible fates of these two notable men——'

" Been a bit of a dark horse evidently," remarked Tubby. " That was new to me; but, of course, every-one knew the next bit," and he continued:

" ' Socially Mr. Craven was the better known, and a year or two ago he was before the public eye when he figured in a *cause célèbre* with Miss Phyllis Cotton, the well-known variety artist.'

" Yes, he certainly was a scorcher," sighed Tubby. " Now he's dead he'll at any rate be able to console himself with the thought that he didn't waste his time on earth." He sighed again as though he feared that consolation would be denied to himself.

Enid studied the paper with large-eyed solemnity. At the bottom of the page was the stop press, which contained one last reference.

" On our telephoning the police at Nidston and Texemouth they could give us no further details, but said no efforts would be spared to elucidate the mystery

of the two men's fates and any possible connection between them."

Enid tackled the remnant of her temporarily forgotten breakfast and poured out a third cup of tea for herself and another for Tubby, who could always be persuaded to drink anything distinct from water.

"Do you think," she asked at length, "that this—this—tragedy will affect the stock markets?"

"What! In these speculative African mining shares?" cried Tubby. "My dear girl, it will simply knock the bottom out of the market. Don't tell me you have your lifetime's savings tucked away in them."

"No," Enid assured him, "I haven't lived long enough to have any savings of my own. I've got a little money, but it's not in Ngamyas. However, I know someone who is interested in Ngamyas. I'd like to put them wise as to the state of affairs if it's not too late. Can you find out what's happening?"

"Of course," said Tubby patronizingly. "I'll go round to old Hutchinson; he'll have it on his tape machine and I can phone several other fellows, too, if necessary. I'll bring you the life history of Ngamya Goldfield shares from the beginning up to this very day. Leave it to me." He gulped down his tea and hurried jauntily from the office.

Enid was glad to be rid of him for a time, especially as his search for information, if successful, would be a check upon the results of her own efforts. Her possession of a little invested money meant that she knew one stockbroker. Him she rang up. He was a very staid man, doing a conservative class of business, and when she mentioned Ngamya Goldfields Ltd. he nearly choked. However, he remembered her as a very charming if unimportant client, and when convinced that there was a serious purpose behind her inquiry he gave her the facts —a busy man's concession to feminine charm.

The company was marking time under a management that was unwilling to call up the unpaid amount

of ten shillings on each share. For a long time the earnings had been nominal, and the shares had stood at three and sixpence. Some eighteen months before they had changed hands in bulk, and that, plus the rise in the price of gold in terms of sterling, had sent the price up to a high level of seven and sixpence, from which it had receded to a steady level of six and threepence. As for the state of affairs that morning, the shares, owing to the news in the papers, were a drug on the market. No sane person would take the risk of buying them, unless he had special information or were paid to face the possible liability of having to meet a call of ten shillings per share. Anyone who offered one shilling a share would be snowed under with offers. This was the gist of his information.

Enid thanked him and hung up. She rang down to the general office for the telegraphic directory and some telegram forms. In the directory she checked off the address, "Sinaiticus, Throgmorton," and the fact that Craven's suave, Jewish friend was named A. I. Silverman. The office boy removed the directory, and Enid awaited the return of Tubby Burton with whatever news he had gleaned. He got back just before eleven with substantially the same information as Enid had secured.

"My advice to your friend, from what Hutchinson said, is to sell if she can," he told her. "She—I suppose it's a she—won't get more than a bob if she's successful. But it's worth trying, because she's safer without stock; at any time that ten shillings per share might be called up."

"I'll let her know," said Enid mendaciously.

When Tubby had gone downstairs to restore order and a pretence of useful activity in the general office, Enid rapidly reviewed the situation.

Clearly some of the big holders of stock, if not all, had relied upon the moral and financial support of Blantyre in the venture—probably they acted merely

as his agents; that had been Craven's opinion, she remembered. With Blantyre presumed dead, his "rabbits" were panic-stricken, for the shares were in their names and holding them was legally their own personal responsibility. If Blantyre and Craven had committed suicide because they could not face their troubles, they had clearly left a very awkward-sized baby for others to hold. The prospective victims were trying to drop the baby before it stuck to their hands. That was the line of argument that had developed from the morning's news and, as she had hoped, had produced the very situation for which Craven had worked so long in vain.

Still, it was a great responsibility to act without authority for another person, and her hand trembled slightly as she pulled the block of telegram forms to her and wrote:

"Sinaiticus, Throgmorton. Scoop. One shilling to eighteenpence.—T.C."

She hurried out and dispatched it herself, bought a box of chocolates and some cigarettes, and returning, retreated to her room. As an additional distraction to her thoughts to help the effect of chocolates and cigarettes, she tried to do some office work. In five minutes she was fast asleep at her desk.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

AT THE OFFICE

As Enid had stated emphatically that she did not wish to be disturbed for any trivial business, the assistant staff left her severely alone. Tubby Burton went out on business and did not return till after lunch. Accordingly it was not until he had banged loudly at the door that Enid woke up at 2.15. She was usually so fresh and vivid that her tired, drawn appearance startled Tubby. He had a most kindly disposition, but was prone to jump to wild, melodramatic conclusions when confronted by a simple fact that happened to puzzle him. Enid was touched by his sympathy until she discovered he was afraid she had taken salts of lemon, or some similar "way out," in despair at the termination of her love-affair with Craven. The energetic rudeness of her remarks convinced him that he had made a mistake; but his kindness was quite unabashed, and he persisted in his inquiries till he discovered she was merely tired and ill-fed. Thereupon he took her out to a quiet restaurant and bullied her into eating a reasonably substantial lunch. Enid felt so much better after this that she told Tubby he was an angel, and apologized for all she had said to him.

When they got back to the office, they were informed that a Mr. A. I. Silverman had just rung up to inquire if there was any further news of Mr. Craven, and to express his sympathy as a business man who had known and respected him greatly.

"Very kind of him," remarked Tubby. "But I've

never heard of him, either on his own or in connection with the Governor. Make a note of the call," he told the clerk, "and any other similar ones, so that they can all be acknowledged later."

This almost destroyed Enid's gravity, despite the suspense and responsibility that were worrying her, and she had to hurry to her room. Here she decided she would know the best or the worst, and boldly rung up A. I. Silverman. A clerk tried to extract her business from her, but she insisted upon speaking to Mr. Silverman himself. In a few minutes his suave voice reached her ears. She explained who she was, thanked him for ringing up, and said how sorry she had been not to receive his call immediately.

"I've never met you, have I?" asked the Jew cautiously.

"No," admitted Enid, "but I believe I've seen you, and I certainly know a great deal about you. In fact, I've been thinking about you for the last hour or two to an extent that should have given you telepathic shivers. How have you got on, Sinaiticus?" she demanded bluntly.

"I think," said the Jew gravely, "I had better come round and have a little talk with you, if you are agreeable. Shall I come to the office?"

"Yes," agreed Enid, "you must, otherwise I can't prove my bona fides; here there is the whole staff to vouch for me if necessary."

"In a quarter of an hour I will be with you," the imperturbable voice assured her, and he hung up.

She rang down to the general office that Mr. Silverman was to be shown up to her room immediately he arrived, and that she could see no one until he had been. Enid patted her hair, powdered her nose, lit a cigarette and waited with every nerve on tenter-hooks. She thought the man would never come, though he was actually only a few minutes longer than he had said. The head typist brought him up and announced him.

Enid took one glance at him, sighed with relief, and held out her hand. It was certainly the man with whom Craven had made his arrangements, and with whom she had seen him talking yesterday. So far there was no mistake.

"Sit down, Mr. Silverman, please," she said. "Will you smoke?" and she offered him cigarettes.

"Thanks." He accepted, and producing matches, lit first her cigarette and then his own. He blew a reflective smoke ring and looked at her quizzically. "I certainly don't know you," he remarked.

"That doesn't matter at all," she replied quickly. "You called on Mr. Craven at the tower yesterday evening when you were motoring with three friends in a Humber saloon. I hope you remembered his last words: 'Whatever you hear, don't get rattled. Wait for me to give the word and then act.' You got the wire this morning, of course. How have things gone?"

This convinced Sinaiticus. "You are behind the scenes, I can see, and know everything," he remarked. "I suppose there's not the slightest need to ask if Mr. Craven is all right?"

"Not the slightest, as far as I know," she assured him.

"Good," said Silverman. "I'm doubly glad, for there will be the deuce of a row over this racket. He'll be able to take the blame. We've succeeded so well that I'm half afraid. Mr. Craven already has 50,000 shares; out of the remainder of 250,000, I scooped in 200,000 at a little more than one shilling a share. The whole lot have cost a pound or two over £12,000. I suppose Blantyre is as hale and hearty as Mr. Craven?"

"Just about, I expect," Enid told him. "Why?"

"It's a pity," sighed Silverman. "He'll be wandering round seeking blood. I calculate he will have lost £30,000 out of what he paid for the shares we now hold, and, of course, the prospective profits were very attractive. Yes, he'll be wild. Where is Mr. Craven at the moment, if it's not indiscreet to ask?"

"I don't know for sure," confessed Enid. "I expect he's at the tower; but Blantyre's men cut the telephone wires and I've no means of knowing without going down. If I do, I may miss him on the road, but I think I'll chance it. He's had a strenuous time, and probably won't stir from the tower till the morning. Yes, I'll start as soon as I can, and drive down in my car."

"Right oh," agreed Silverman. "Give me two minutes to scribble a note for him and I'll get out of your way. He'll like to see the figures in my own handwriting—sort of official assurance."

"More convincing than my gush, you mean," suggested Enid.

The Jew laughed, and disavowed any such thought. Enid rather liked him. He, too, had a suggestion of the debonair adventurer about him. She suddenly remembered she had forgotten to send to the bank for ready cash; he obligingly cashed her a cheque for ten pounds and took his leave.

"I shall see you again soon," he remarked, with a quiet, mischievous smile, and a flash of his white teeth. He seemed to regard her, Enid thought, as a permanent feature of the landscape.

His visit had set her mind at rest; the whole adventure could not cost more than £12,000, and, from what she surmised, even a total loss of that amount could not seriously inconvenience Craven if the worst came to the worst. Thus relieved of anxiety, she was able to turn her attention to office matters, and spent a strenuous half-hour in reviewing work and making arrangements for the immediate future. This done, she dashed across the City in a taxi and out to her flat, where she had a bath, changed, and flung a few necessities into a week-end case. Her car was garaged close at hand, in fact she fetched it round to the door while some water was boiling to make tea. She drank one hurried cup, poured the rest into a thermos flask, and, having thrust her few oddments of luggage into the car, drove rapidly away.

It was only five o'clock; she felt fresher than she had done all day, and decided she could get through most of the journey before nightfall. Certainly she could have finished with Craven by 10.30, and drive back to Nidston, where "The Mottram Arms Hotel" would afford her accommodation for the night.

A traffic jam held her up for a few minutes before she was clear of the City, and she took this opportunity to buy a paper. The one she secured was the evening counterpart of the *National Echo*, and came out of the same tub. Apparently further inquiries in the course of the day had failed to discover either Craven or Blantyre, and the hypothetical account of their fate had grown to an epic of sensational journalism. Apparently, too, there had been violent repercussions in the stock market, and another scene in the House. She pitched the paper into the back of the car when the traffic was clearing; Craven would enjoy reading it, she decided—unless he was in the mood to dislike notoriety, and in that case he would most emphatically jib, until he learnt what grist it had brought to his mill.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ESTIMATING THE SPOIL

THE strenuous adventures of the last twenty-four hours had tried Craven physically; but mentally he was quite alert, and so found the quiet perusal of Coddington's report an occupation that exactly suited his mood. He finished it about 9.30, and decided that it was an admirable piece of work, being not only based on profound technical knowledge, but also presented with remarkable lucidity and force. His estimate of the elephantine Coddington appreciated many hundred per cent. The reason why Blantyre had been so anxious to suppress it was clear; it shed a new light upon what had been regarded as the vagaries of the gold-bearing reefs, and the easier and more comprehensive understanding it made possible immediately revealed the hidden possibilities of the region mined by Ngamya Goldfields Ltd. The report told the management where to look for almost certain wealth. Craven had made this discovery for himself, partly by chance and partly by direct investigation on the spot; Coddington arrived at it rather by a process of scientific deduction from laws he had himself laid down. Craven metaphorically took off his hat to him.

But his curiosity once satisfied, a mood of reaction set in. He threw the report down; after all, it was of little interest to him now, since he had failed to secure control of the mine. He cursed Blantyre afresh, knowing full well that, as Blantyre had said, the confessions of malpractice he had extorted from him were of no real value—they might be used to effect spiteful reprisals, but no real redress.

Irritably Craven kicked the smouldering logs of the

fire together. It was now ten o'clock. No likelihood of any callers. At the back of his mind had been a half-formulated thought that Coddington and the two girls might call round on him; after all, they owed him an apology, especially Coddington, who had smashed up his car. Craven wondered how Coddington would fare with the insurance company, which had to make good the loss, but might feel inclined to recover from the man who started the car on its last ill-fated run over the edge of the cliff. Craven lit a cigarette and mentally shook himself. He was tired and peevish, he decided, it was not his usual mood to expect people to come round especially to be pleasant to him—when such a thing happened he invariably felt embarrassed. He sprawled out in the chair; his thoughts left Coddington, passed Mabel by, and came to Enid. Enid, he had long since decided, was a very disturbing creature. He had loved liberty and led a very adventurous, wandering life; here at last was a girl who might easily make him change his ways. Did he want to change his ways or not? How much was he in love with the girl? Craven was just old enough and sufficiently experienced not to have all capacity for thought swamped by emotion in this crisis. How little this meant he realized. He remembered how his blood had stirred on the one occasion when he had kissed her, and reflected that, if on a similar future occasion she should retort by winding her arms around his neck and kissing him in return, he was a lost man.

"Yes," he reflected silently, "she's a nice quiet girl; but if she should wake up, the little monkey could do what she liked with me. Do I want her to?"

At this point the current of his thoughts was broken by the unexpected sound of a car. It was absolutely unmistakable, for the driver, evidently unfamiliar with the road and bent on safety first, had gone down into second and was driving the car noisily down the track. As it drew up before the tower, he flung open a lattice window and looked down in surprise. The car was an

old Austin saloon; it did not belong to any of his friends and acquaintances, as far as he knew. Who on earth could it be?

A girl clambered wearily out of the car, glanced up at him and waved her hand.

"It's me," she called in a clear voice.

"Gosh!" he ejaculated. "Enid, of all people!" And he plunged down the stairway to the door, which he wrenched open. "Come in!" he cried. "I have been thinking about you and wondering what had happened to you to-day."

She smiled, tucked a paper firmly under her arm, and stepped into the hall.

"I don't believe you," she said, with a playful laugh. "I expect you were asleep after a heavy dinner, and the noise of the car woke you. That slope frightens me. I came down in second."

"Sensible thing to do," he agreed, and guiding her into the old stairway, took her up to the living-room, where he planted her in one of the huge leather chairs by the fire. The warmth, the comfortable chair, and the delicately suffused light were a welcome change after the tiring drive in the chilly night. She sighed with relief, and he noticed how tired she looked.

"God bless me, girl, what have you been doing?" he cried. "You look worn out. I'm going to give you a drink."

"All right, thanks," she said, "but you'll have to feed me, too, or you'll have me drunk. I'm as hollow as a drum."

He made inarticulate noises, expressive of extreme sympathy, and raced down to the pantry. In five minutes he returned with a plate of bread and butter —heavily buttered and delicately cut—some excellent Gorgonzola and a bottle of champagne.

"Pull your hat and coat off," he ordered, and proceeded to carry an occasional table across the room for her use. He soon had her settled, and to his satisfaction his provender began rapidly to disappear, and the

colour just as rapidly to return to her face and the sparkle to her dark eyes.

"You'll have to drink level with me to keep me in countenance," she ordered.

"With pleasure," he agreed. "I'll fetch another bottle."

"Not on your life," she told him. "This isn't a debauch. While I'm devouring some more of this marvellous cheese, tell me what happened to you after you left me at Mitchell's farm."

He did so, but although he told his tale well, half his attention was on the curl of her hair, her slender fingers that lifted the glass of bubbling champagne over which her dark eyes flickered at him, the deep, husky little voice that laughed and chuckled at his talk. Before he was half-way through his narrative, Craven had succumbed to his fate and made the silent vow that Enid Petersham had got to be his woman; he would never rest till he had enticed those arms of hers around his neck.

She finished eating just before he concluded his account, so that he was immediately free to ask her in turn what she had been doing since he saw her. To her amusement, he clearly did not expect to hear much.

"What time did you leave Mitchell's?" was his first question.

"Just after two," she told him. "Mabel was still asleep."

"Very sensible of her. Might have been better for you if you'd done the same; you looked all in half an hour ago. But instead you borrowed this car and have been cavorting round the country. Where did you get it from, by the bye?"

"It's my own," she said primly. "I unlocked the garage and ran it out. The procedure is perfectly simple."

This puzzled Craven. "But I somehow understood," he objected, "that you came down from London by train on Saturday. On Saturday—ye gods! It seems weeks ago."

"I did," she agreed.

"Then how on earth did you get hold of your car to-day if you left it in London on Saturday?"

"I fetched it," she stated.

Craven was becoming bewildered. "But how could you? Ordinarily speaking, you couldn't leave Mitchell's after two, go to London, get your car and drive down here by ten o'clock."

"Oh, I see where you've gone wrong," she cried. "I thought you understood. I left Mitchell's at two this morning—a.m., not p.m."

"You thought nothing of the sort, young woman," retorted Craven severely. "You were deliberately befooling me. Let's have the plain truth. Why did you leave Mitchell's at the crazy hour of two this morning? What have you been doing? And—to be damnably rude—why have you turned up here alone to see me at this unrespectable hour? Not that I mind; but the truth is, I'm so delighted that it's an unanswerable reason why you shouldn't be here at all."

"You're going to cry, 'Fe-fi-fo-fum!' and begin to snuff the air in a minute, I can tell," she retorted derisively.

"No, I'm not; but I'll certainly shake you if you plague me any longer." He was sitting opposite to her in the corresponding chair on the other side of the open hearth. As he spoke he lifted the small table away and leaned towards her. "Come here," he said.

His strong hands slid round her wrists and drew her out of her chair on to his knees. This was more than she had bargained for; she sobered down, but did not struggle, and maintained an appearance of quiet unconcern.

"Will you promise," she temporized, "not to be angry with me till you have heard everything?"

"How on earth can I tell what I'll do until I hear? What have you been doing, you maddening little witch?" and he gave her a mild shake, to which she replied with a definite thump from a small, hard fist.

"In the first place," she began, "I wanted to do an old friend a good turn. So I got Mitchell to run me up to the nearest telephone call-box, rang up Hallam of the *National Echo*, and told him all the exciting events of last night up to the point where you and Blantyre disappeared from your usual haunts, and sorrowing neighbours and employees began to fear the worst."

"The deuce you did! " gasped Craven, in absolute astonishment. "Whatever for? "

"Journalists do not live by bread alone, but principally by scoops. Hallam is an old friend; I filled a column or two for him. Naturally, I hurried up to London on the morning train to see what sort of a job he made of the tale, and how your dear friends reacted to it."

Craven was indubitably speechless, so she hurried on.

"Hallam did very well indeed. Unfortunately, I left the *Echo* in town, but here's the evening paper, which, if anything, is slightly better." She slid off his knees, hurried across to where her coat and hat lay on a chair, and picked up the paper she had brought. Opening it out on the table, she beckoned Craven to come and look.

He tottered over, still mute. He examined it all patiently—headlines, photographs and letter-press. When he had finished, he ran his hand over his head as though dazed.

"Fame at last," he muttered. "But why did you do it? Are you trying to get me on the films or into Madame Tussaud's? "

"Neither," she told him seriously. "I thought it would blow Ngamya Goldfields' shares to pieces in the stock market and put paid to Blantyre's schemes. You rather owed him a rub, didn't you? "

"I did," he agreed; "and what actually happened? "

In reply she indicated the market reports on the inside last page. He read through all the relevant news.

"Gosh! " he ejaculated. "Hoisted with a land mine. If only I had known and could have been there. What an opportunity! "

Enid turned about, hesitating a moment as she looked round the room.

"The next point you will perhaps find doubly surprising. Last night—as you said, weeks ago, it seems—you stood by that window, I think, talking to A. I. Silverman, just before you set out to drive your man to the station. The window was open. I was with Coddington in the shrubbery and heard all you said. Naturally, when I was in London this morning and the market in those shares blew up (I was rather afraid it might), I wired to 'Sinaiticus, Throgmorton,' to scoop, and he scooped. Here's a note he's sent down for your edification; he still thinks the morning's wire was from you." She handed him Silverman's letter as she finished speaking.

Craven sat down to read it. Enid leaned against the table, gripping the edge with her hands. Her knuckles shone white. Men were queer creatures, she thought, and wondered how he would take it. When he had finished reading, he stared hard at her for a full half minute without moving or speaking. She met his gaze without a flicker of her eyes.

Then he got up and slowly walked over to her.

"I'm going to drink your health," he said simply. "Stand there while I do it," and he picked her up and put her on the table. He reached for his glass and the last of the champagne. "It isn't that you've raked in about £150,000 when profits are made up in a few months' time," he said as he poured the wine; "it isn't that you've won a game I started and couldn't finish; it isn't that you've drubbed Blantyre as soundly as any man ever was drubbed and given me my revenge; no, it is none of those things that captures me. It's your nerve I admire, my girl. Never have I seen such a slip of truly tempered steel in my life. You beat every woman I have ever known, in every respect."

He had filled his glass, and raised it. Enid stood on the table with her face pale as ivory, and seemingly lit up by her dark eyes.

"My deepest respect, Miss Enid Petersham," said Craven, "my deepest affection, and may I be so honoured and favoured, that I am allowed to offer them to you as long as I live."

He emptied the glass at a draught, bowed and set it on the table again, without once taking his eyes from her.

Silently he offered her his hand for her to spring down from the table. She took it, but refused to jump.

"Why should I?" she said, with a low laugh. "You put me here."

Craven's arms slipped round her and lifted her from the table, but not down to the floor. He held her so that her dark eyes were level with his grey ones.

"You unutterable darling," he murmured. As he kissed her, two slender arms went round his neck.

They came down to earth eventually; the tides of normal thought and speech began to flow once more, and, as Craven expressed it, they proceeded to get down to brass tacks. The big issue which had suddenly swamped all other considerations for both of them was quickly disposed of, for Craven announced with all the possessive urge of a primitive cave-man that they would get married as soon as he could secure a licence. Enid had not the slightest objection to this, and was too genuinely unaffected to pretend otherwise, so the point was conceded without demur.

Of the results of her incursion into the realms of finance she had, however, considerable misgivings, despite Craven's wild congratulations; she remembered Silverman's prophecy of a public uproar over their ramp—or was it her ramp? Craven was quite unperturbed; the politicians, the business circles and the newspapers could rave as they pleased, he did not care two straws. Dealing in such shares as Ngamyas was admittedly an artificial gamble from start to finish as far as most people were concerned, and they went into it with their eyes open. It was a game of poker, and if you bluffed your opponents it was all within the rules. In this case he did not suppose anyone had lost any

money except Blantyre, and he deserved to, as a lying cheat.

"I'll give you a good whack of the profits as soon as we can estimate them, my dear," he told her. "But I'm not intending to realize on the shares immediately the publication of Coddington's report sends their value up. If Coddington will go out to Africa, we'll have the company reorganized so that it is a really respectable gold-mine. Then we'll sell out, for, frankly, gold-mines have no permanent interest for me. One set of men drag gold out of the darkness of the earth and another set thrust it back into the darkness of bank vaults. It never does any good to anyone—the whole business is crazy. If we realize a lot of money I'd sooner sink it in an irrigation scheme or a railway to open up new country. In those ways you get food grown and enable people to live; there's satisfaction in work that produces such results."

Enid realized that all this was but the larger aspect of Craven's habitual impulse to do the best he could for all those people whose lives were influenced by his own. She suddenly realized that this fiery individualist by her side would have made an excellent feudal overlord centuries before, and that if his financial buccaneering made him very wealthy, many people would ultimately bless his unhallowed success.

While she listened—she was again sitting normally in a chair—she glanced slowly backwards and forwards from Craven's face to the small clock over the hearth. She had no thought of the time; but a fraction of her attention was devoted to watching a peculiar and interesting phenomenon. Craven's face and the white dial of the clock ever and anon seemed to recede and become small in the most mysterious fashion. Suddenly they would rush back to their normal distance and size. At the same time Craven's voice and the ticking of the clock slowly faded in intensity and then suddenly resumed their strength. The explanation, when it dawned on her, came as a mild shock—she was falling asleep as she sat. With this understanding came the

realization that she had suddenly gone hopelessly and helplessly tired.

" By Jove! " she said. " I'm sorry, but I'm absolutely done. If I don't move I'll roll on to the floor and lie there."

With a great effort she sprang out of the chair, but the inertia had assailed her legs so that she staggered and pitched about. Had not Craven caught her she would have fallen. A second realization flashed upon her.

" My dear," she stuttered, " I'm not only tired, I'm also more than a little drunk. It's your fault. I'm not used to champagne and no sleep. I had about three hours in the train and two in the office; that's all since Saturday night. If I don't go to bed I'll die," and she slumped helplessly in his arms.

" You poor kid," said Craven, " I ought to have thought of this myself. You're exhausted. Go and get into my bed. Bust conventions. No one knows you're here, for that matter, and you're perfectly safe with me."

" I know," she said. " I don't mind you. But if all the world was running wide-eyed round the tower I'd still have to turn in somewhere. What a graceless female I am."

Craven steered her up the stairs and to his room, where he switched on the light. Fortunately, he had straightened his bed and was fairly tidy in his habits, so that the room looked respectable. Enid, however, was blind to everything except the alluring bed.

" I threw a bag into the car, expecting to stay at Nidston; do you mind getting it? " she asked.

" Right," he assured her. " I won't be a minute. The bathroom is on the ground floor; but there's hot and cold water for a wash in the small toilet-room outside, between the two bedrooms. I'll be back by the time you are ready."

" There's not such a great hurry," she told him. " Put the car out of sight while you're there. I don't worry about Mrs. Grundy, but there's no need to let people know more than is unavoidable."

Craven smiled and slipped away down the stairs. Outside there was a bright moon which lit up the creek, but a chill wind which discouraged any loitering to admire the view. Craven was surprised how cold it had gone. He could not find the switch of the roof-light of the saloon, so it was by a process of systematic fumbling that he found all Enid's belongings. These he carried inside and deposited on the hall table. From the table drawer he also secured a flash-lamp, and with this he assured himself that he had removed everything from the car, and also glanced over the controls. The car must have got thoroughly cold, even in the short time since Enid's arrival, for it was most obstinate to start. In his unfamiliarity with it, he also stalled the engine twice before he had the car safely in the garage. By the time he had locked up and got back into the tower, he realized he had been much longer than he had anticipated. He picked up Enid's case and her hand-bag, which she had forgotten, and hurried upstairs.

Evidently he had been much longer than she, too, had anticipated. She had not waited for him; to her sleepy mind seconds must have seemed like minutes. His bedroom door was ajar; but no light showed. He put his ear to the crack of the door and listened. The sound of quiet, regular breathing reached his ear. So far so good, he thought, but was she in bed or had she slithered on to the floor? He hesitated diffidently a moment, and then, quietly pushing open the door, switched on the light and entered. Enid was in bed fast asleep; her clothes were negligently pitched on to two chairs and she was clad in his silk pyjamas, which she had found and commandeered. He smiled at her insouciance, pulled the bed-clothes over her shoulder, and pushed back a curl that was tumbling over her face.

"Sleep well," he murmured to her unheeding ears, unconsciously repeating the phrase with which he had once before taken leave of her. He left the hand-bag on the dressing-table, the case against the wall, and tip-toed silently from the room, closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CODDINGTON REDIVIVUS

ALTHOUGH Craven was contemptuous of conventional respectability as vouched for by outward appearance, he did not welcome the present delicate situation. He felt that once a girl was exposed to the malice of puritanical tongues—as Enid might be—a certain compulsion was laid upon her to re-establish her reputation by making the obvious marriage. He wanted no woman, not even Enid, unless she were perfectly free to say yea or nay to him—no woman, he felt, was worth having unless she came of her own absolute free will and desire. Accordingly, even at that late hour of 11.30, he debated whether to get out Enid's car and fetch Mrs. Brunton over for the night. He decided that such a course would be rather ridiculous, but still did not feel happy about the affair—the thought lingered that later he might regret not having been squeamishly discreet.

Thinking of the car awakened in his mind the annoying doubt whether he had locked up the garage; he decided he must have done so, but did not remember actually turning the key. He tried to push the uncertainty aside; but it persisted in nagging at his attention, so in disgust he went down and strolled round to the garage to settle the matter. He gave the door a vigorous shake and found it fast; his common sense had not been at fault; he had locked up. As he was turning away, he was astonished to hear what appeared to be the sound of another approaching car, and, when he came within sight of the door of the tower, he saw not one, but two cars pull up in the light that shone through the open door and uncurtained windows.

"My stars!" he muttered. "It's simply rained people the last twenty-four hours here. Who can this be?"

Four people got out of the cars as Craven strode forward, but since he was wearing crêpe-soled shoes they were quite unaware of his presence. Mabel he recognized on his near approach, and then Coddington; the other two he had never seen before—one was a large and apparently very muscular middle-aged lady, the other a small man of the same intermediate years.

"The place is like a robber's hold," announced the large lady in an emphatic voice. "There's a nefarious atmosphere about it."

"Oh, quite, Aunt Lou," agreed Coddington. "The scene is quite *à la* Grand Guignol. I expect Craven has left the door open for a moment while he throws his latest and freshest corpse into the creek."

The little man shuddered. "You don't actually think this man Craven is engaged in anything reprehensible at this very moment, do you?"

"Don't be silly, Uncle George," remonstrated Mabel. "Frank is trying to be funny again, now he has had a meal and a couple of drinks. Craven's an awfully decent sort, as I discovered last night."

"Thanks," said Craven laconically.

As no one knew he was there, the sudden remark was startling, and Uncle George, who received it directly from behind him, leapt into the air with fright. Coddington restrained him with a large hand, and peered into the darkness whence the voice came.

"Oh, it's you," he said, when a ray of light picked out Craven's face and head of white hair. "Don't shoot," he added facetiously. "This isn't another raid; I brought Mabel to vouch for my peaceful intentions."

"All right," said Craven, accepting this avowal. "If you want to see me, I suggest you go upstairs. Perhaps you'll lead, Coddington; if I remember correctly, you know the way thoroughly well."

Coddington grunted at this dig, but did as he was asked. Aunt Lou followed him, then Mabel, and last Uncle George. Craven shut the hall door, which snapped to with a decisive finality that jarred upon

Uncle George's nerves. The little man hurried as close behind the others as he could up the gloomy winding stairway—he had a nasty feeling that sinewy fingers might slip out of the darkness and seize upon the nape of his neck.

Craven motioned his unexpected guests to chairs, threw a couple of light logs on the embers of the fire, and then faced round interrogatively.

Coddington had remained standing. "First of all, Craven," he said, "I must apologize for the scandalous accusations I levelled at you last night, and the assault I made upon you. I acted in good faith; but it was all a ghastly mistake. As man to man I can only say I'm sorry, and of course it goes without saying I'll make good any damage I caused."

"Good enough," replied Craven instantly, and held out his hand, which the other took. "It did not take me long to realize it was all a mistake, and I should be a fool to bear you any grudge. As for the damage, don't let that worry you, for I imagine that, when the full account is worked out, there won't be much to pay. But where did you get to after you left here? Where you've been is the last bit of the puzzle still unexplained."

Mabel tittered, and Coddington glowered at her in disgust.

"The answer's easy," he told Craven gloomily. "I've been in jail."

"What! " cried Craven incredulously. "In jail? "

Mabel laughed outright. "I can't help it," she apologized, "and I know Frank feels like screwing my neck, but really, now it's all as good as over, I can't help seeing the funny side. When Mitchell drove me home at midday I found mother in tears over the news Aunt Lou had just left—Frank was in jail at Texemouth, charged with criminal complicity in the disappearance of Mr. Blantyre, arson resulting in the destruction of a warehouse, an assault upon the police whereby P.C. James was knocked into the harbour, and,

finally, contempt of court because he would not stop talking when ordered to do so by the magistrates. Mother was distraught, but she had just sufficient sense to remark that she could not see the last charges mattered if they were going to hang the poor lad."

Craven gave an undisguised chuckle. "Sorry, Coddington, but it is really funny. There's divine justice in it; you got me into a scrape and my ensuing sins fell on you. It's more than I ever hoped for. Have a drink and tell me all about it."

Coddington accepted liquid refreshment; but the others refused. Tumbler in hand, he began the dolorous tale of his experiences.

"Things went wrong from the start," he explained. "First of all, though I thought I knew my way round this district, I got lost in that maze of narrow lanes inland from here. Landing in the wrong village, I found a bobby immediately; but he said the tower was out of his parish, and it was more than his job was worth to leave his beat. Did you ever hear anything so mad? The way this country is run! In short, he wouldn't do anything towards hauling you to clink, Craven, beyond directing me to his counterpart in the next village. That man was out; but his wife assured me he had only gone up the road half a mile to the cross-roads. Away I went, found the spot but no Robert—the minion of the law had vanished. I circled round the various roads, but not a sign of him could I see. Eventually I ran into a cul-de-sac, and had the devil of a job turning the car round on what proved to be a rubbish tip, for I laid one back tyre open on a broken bottle. When I came to change the wheel I found the proper spanner had been left out of the kit of tools—I only got the car second-hand on Saturday. My pocket-torch I'd left here somewhere, so I had to change the wheel in the dark by means of two adjustable spanners. Never had such a game in my life; it took half an hour, and I barked practically every knuckle on both hands."

He held out his battered members in proof.

"Eventually," continued Coddington, "I got back to the policeman's cottage, and found that he had returned and gone out again to look for me. I scoured round once more for twenty minutes, but might as well have been searching a pitch dark room for a black cat that wasn't there. Back to his house again I went; but no policeman. So I told his wife all about our little bicker here at the tower, and she said she would send him down on his bike as soon as he returned. I turned back, for I had by now been so long that I had visions of your gnawing your way out of your bonds and strangling that poor child, Enid. However, when I got here I found my pity had been wasted, for she had exorcised your devil and set you loose to go off with her to Texemouth. I got the note, of course, explaining why, and buzzed away to Texemouth myself.

"That warehouse was burning beautifully when I got on to the front, and all the local intelligentsia were rubbing their hands together, saying, 'God bless my soul!' and, 'Did you ever!' and thoroughly enjoying the blaze. Spotting the *Corsair* off the pier, I asked how I could get out to her, and an old fisherman pointed out two men about fifteen yards away who, he said, belonged to her. I always believe in direct methods, so I pushed across to these chaps to demand explanations and the whole truth about the boat and Mabel's kidnapping. Just as I got close to them, one of them happened to glance back at the *Corsair*.

"'By God! Bill,' he cried, 'look at that!' and he pointed to the boat.

"I looked, too, and there was your launch just slipping away. My sight's pretty good, and I felt fairly sure I recognized Enid by her figure. The men turned and ran for the pier, and I chased after them. 'Not so fast,' I shouted, being bent on hindering them while you made your getaway. That's how the bother began, and soon the fight was going strong. Although there were two of them, I'm a fairly big creature, and didn't

have at all an uncomfortable time. In fact, I was doing distinctly well, and had hopes in a few minutes of knocking their two heads together good and proper, when a third fellow waded in. He claimed later that I should have known him as the local policeman; but all I saw—and that in a very dim way—was that he wore trousers and a pair of braces over a vivid suit of flannelette pyjamas. I clouted him straight into the harbour without any discussion. But this interruption enabled the other two to run down the pier and get away in their small yacht tender. All I could do was to search for a boat in order to follow them, and while I was at this the bobby in trousers and pyjamas crawled out of the harbour, rallied a few of his pals, and fell upon me. I did my best; but eventually they trussed me up, and away I went on a creaking hand-cart to the local 'jug'—the tumbrils they had for French aristocrats weren't in it with my hand-cart—and when I reflected that I'd saved you at the expense of my own liberty, I felt nobler than Sidney Carton."

Coddington paused for a drink, and then went on:

"Very unfeelingly they pitched me into their one cell, locked up and went back to the fire. Lying on the plank bed I snuffed the stale atmosphere of a genuine jail, and, when my eyes got used to the darkness, I gazed up at the glimmering square of the small barred window, through which there winked down at me one wistful, solitary star."

"Steady with the sob-stuff, Frank," interrupted Mabel.

Coddington grinned. "What I mean is," he admitted, "that I felt here was fresh, first-hand experience I ought to savour to the full, for I might work it into my next novel. Unfortunately, I went to sleep.

"About five, the unfeeling policeman returned, and, having put on his tunic over his pyjama jacket and found his helmet, he was surer of himself than ever. Would he listen to my explanations? Not he. Unfortunately, the crew of the *Corsair* had returned, and

he had rowed out to book down their names as witnesses for the prosecution. Those two were choice liars, arch-children of the devil; they had pitched him a fine tale. A young woman whom they did not know had managed to get aboard the yacht to see Mr. Blantyre. While they were engrossed by the fire on the quay—I had started it for that especial purpose—the young woman had distracted Blantyre's attention while a launch ran alongside the *Corsair* unobserved. Some roughs had kidnapped Mr. Blantyre and decamped, taking the woman, their accomplice, away with them. Despite my attack upon them, the faithful pair had rushed in pursuit to rescue their employer. They had overhauled the launch and forced it inshore by the wreck, but had been unable to recover Blantyre, whom, they feared, his enemies had thrown overboard. They implored the constable to keep me fast so that the truth could be wrung out of me. Poor Mr. Blantyre! No men ever had a kinder employer.

"The bobby lapped it all up, and saw himself safe for promotion when I had been tried and executed. He entered down on the charge-sheet the hypothetical murder, the certain arson, the undeniable assault of which I was guilty, and locked me up again to continue my sleep. The magistrates dotted down the fourth charge of contempt, and all I did was to try to reason with them. That was about midday. They promised to communicate with my relatives, and back I went to jail, bail being refused.

"Aunt Lou rolled up like a tank soon after lunch. From the start she shook that bobby's equanimity; a solicitor she secured put the wind up him still further, so much so, that he decided to check the story given him by his precious pair of witnesses. When he got down to the *Corsair*, he found they had decamped. This sent him in a panic to discuss the situation with the chairman of the bench. This worthy could not be found for a couple of hours, during which time Mabel arrived to corroborate my story. He now went hot-foot

to search again for the chairman of the bench, and *en route* ran into Blantyre. In answer to his excited babble, Blantyre replied that he was mad, slipped into the 'Old George,' out by another door, and so shook him off.

"After this, my solicitor got me released on the understanding, the magistrate said, that I turned up for trial if required; on the understanding, I assured him, that I should certainly prosecute the police for wrongful arrest and detention.

"Even then I did not get away without a further scene, for an apoplectic sidesman raged into the station and wanted me held as a witness in an action for slander he was bringing against the vicar's warden. This Christian brother had, over his morning ale, accused the sidesman of paying me to fire the warehouse so that he could draw the insurance. I told him that he knew quite well I was not the man he had paid, and I was not prepared to deny a crime I knew nothing about. So why keep me?

"My solicitor said I was tactless."

Coddington heaved a deep sigh, and Craven sympathetically filled up his tumbler again. Coddington nodded his thanks and drank.

"Well," he resumed, "this is all by the bye, and not what we came round for. Too trivial to worry you about at this time of night. What we really want to know—that is, Uncle George does—is whether you got hold of that copy of my report. The matter is really very important. He has been on the phone to certain people so important that you speak of them with bated breath and never mention their names. They will have apoplexy if that report doesn't turn up immediately. There's been another row in the House, too. The report has to be found and published."

"It's here," Craven assured him. He rose, picked it up from his desk and handed it to Uncle George, who ran the pages through his fingers and made crooning noises of deep content. Craven, too, was content;

the sooner the report was published, the better he would be pleased.

While listening to Coddington he had, especially towards the end, been slightly distracted by Aunt Lou, who fidgeted and looked around her. He decided that she was bored at this second recital of Coddington's adventures, until he saw that her eyes dwelt on the empty champagne bottle and glasses; then he thought she perhaps repented of her refusal of the fruit of the grape. He accordingly took the opportunity of again suggesting wine, or a liqueur, or whisky, if she fancied it.

"No, thank you, Mr. Craven," she declined, in rather a frosty voice. "It is extremely late, and we must be going if Frank and Mr. Neil really have concluded all their business."

The two men said they had, so the whole party rose.

"There was nothing wrong with Enid Petersham, was there," Aunt Lou asked casually, "that she had to rush off to London without a word to Mabel?"

"Oh, no," Craven assured her. "No trouble at all. Miss Petersham is quite all right."

"You've heard from her, then?" pursued Aunt Lou.

"Yes," said Craven cheerfully. "She let me have a few items of news through from London."

"Good!" she said. "I'm glad she's all right. However did she manage to get through to you, though? We found your line out of order."

"We have ways and means," Craven told her airily. "When you are constantly under the necessity of transacting important business, you can't rely entirely on the telephone—there's always the chance it may let you down at a critical moment, just when a message is all-important."

"Certainly. In that case Enid, I suppose, came down here and gave you the message personally?"

"Whatever makes you think that, Miss Coddington?" inquired Craven in an innocent tone.

"Principally the fact," she informed him tartly, "that her coat, hat and gloves are on that chair. That there are two empty champagne glasses on the table may also be to the point."

Craven could not decide for the moment whether he was annoyed or amused, and so did not reply, but looked at her with a bland insouciance that could mean anything or nothing.

"Where is she?" demanded Aunt Lou, in a tone of aggressive determination.

"Asleep upstairs," said Craven casually. "Make as little noise as possible. She's tired."

Uncle George deliberately dropped his beloved report and grovelled on the floor to recover it; Coddington looked at the ceiling; Mabel began to giggle.

"I'm going to the poor girl immediately," announced Aunt Lou, and her lips set in a straight line above a jutting chin. "Champagne, eh? You wolf!"

Craven shrugged his shoulders and resigned himself to the inevitable. Miss Coddington glared as she swept by him, and Mabel followed, evidently with more idea of getting this dragon of virtue on the leash than in fear for Enid.

In her agitation, Aunt Lou passed by the switches, and in the darkness would probably have floundered about disastrously in the upper story of the tower; but Mabel snapped them on as she brought up the rear. There were only three doors to try, and Aunt Lou found the right one last.

Enid had tossed the clothes back loosely and lay asleep, a picture of innocence and charm. Her masculine pyjamas were, however, all too apparent, and a deep groan burst from Aunt Lou's ample bosom.

She laid a firm hand on Enid's slim shoulder and shook her. Enid gave a smothered mumble of protest and rolled over without opening her eyes. Aunt Lou shook her again.

"Put the tray by the bed and leave me alone," said Enid, still not rationally awake.

Her tormentor forcibly hauled her into a sitting position, and this caused her to open her eyes.

"What's the matter?" she demanded in sleepy alarm. "Where am I?" And she gazed round in wide-eyed wonder.

"Get up, my dear," commanded Aunt Lou. "Thank God we came in time to save you from that monster! You poor lamb!"

Enid pushed her hair out of her eyes and shook herself free from Aunt Lou's compelling hand. It never took her long to collect her wits on awakening, and even now, when aroused from so weary a sleep, she soon began to grasp the situation.

"Monster?" she demanded, a last touch of bewilderment still crowding her brain.

"Yes!" boomed Aunt Lou. "That awful man Craven. Oh, if we had been an hour later!"

Comprehension dawned completely on Enid, but possibly some effect of the champagne still lingered, so that—*in vino veritas*—she spoke with more point than tact.

"Craven!" she cried. "Don't be silly! He's an absolute angel and wouldn't hurt a fly. Anyway, who cares? Go away, I'm tired." And she forthwith rolled the clothes round her with the most amazing adroitness, and, with a promptitude that was still more astounding, fell fast asleep again.

"And that's that!" remarked Mabel. "Come along home, Aunt Lou, you're not wanted. Enid rather fancies that shade in silk pyjamas. She is as safe as she wants to be."

Aunt Lou's lips were set in a yet straighter line as she took her departure.

Craven sensed something of what had happened, and as he conducted his guests to their cars he contrived to button-hole Mabel.

"Did Enid bite her?" he asked in a whisper.

"She did," replied Mabel. "I'm afraid she's a little hussy, but the pair of you ought to be most wonderfully

happy. This doesn't mean anything, I know, and I'll see that none of these folk keep any silly notions in their heads or say a word. Thanks for being such a sport. Good night."

"Good night," said Craven. "Count me your friend all and every time." He helped Mabel into the car.

With a wave of hands from Coddington and Mabel who drove, his visitors departed in the two cars. Craven watched them out of sight, and then, locking the tower door, turned in to sleep on the settee.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

AN UNEXPECTED REPERCUSSION

THE just are reputed to sleep well; the reckless probably sleep better. Craven's preparations for slumber were very simple. He let down the end of the settee, kicked off his shoes and borrowed Enid's coat to throw over his feet—he thought this only fair as she had his pyjamas. With the comforting reflection that things had ended very well, his mind drifted swiftly into sleep.

But things had not yet ended.

It was a wonderfully clear night, the chill in the air had brought down the mist as dew, and possibly Craven's eyes as they gave a last glance through the window may have picked out the points of light far out at sea where the ships passed up and down the Channel. If his eyes saw, his mind did not heed, and he had no recollection of noting the ships that night. Nevertheless, it later struck him as a remarkable coincidence that, just as he was congratulating himself on final success, the lights of the S.S. *Vortigern* had probably slid beneath his gaze unnoticed; had he noticed them they would have had no special message for him, but still the coincidence was there—how the old ironical gods must have smiled.

The *Vortigern* was a first-class, ocean-going tramp steamer of 8,000 tons dead weight. She was a modern ship, in every respect the last word in efficiency; her speed was fifteen knots and she had accommodation for a few passengers. She was seldom without these latter, except in the worst of the winter months and when business carried her into the more unlovely and out-of-the-way parts of the commercial world; there is always a considerable minority of people who prefer to protract rather than shorten a sea voyage, and who eschew an ocean-going hotel in preference for a workaday sea-

wagon on which one really gets the experience of being at sea. On the *Vortigern* these advantages could be enjoyed in plain comfort, and with no fear of a jazz band in the music saloon, for the obvious reason that she possessed neither.

While Enid Petersham and Craven slept in peace, the ship nosed her way past the Needles and into the Solent. The tide was with her and she quickly drew level with Hurst Castle and left its light winking under the port quarter; to starboard the pier head lights of Yarmouth came into view and receded. A succession of ships going out to sea passed her as she steadily held on her way along the looming coast of the Isle of Wight. Soon she sighted the gleam of the light at Egypt Point, beyond which lay Cowes Road where she would pick up the pilot for Southampton.

One of the passengers had turned out to see the ship make port, and, being an especial favourite with the captain, was allowed on the bridge. Her passport showed her as married—a Mrs. Coutts-Frazer—but the captain knew her as Miss Phyllis Cotton, of variety fame, and found her very charming. She was screwed into a corner on the starboard side of the bridge, with hands in the pockets of her thick coat, and a small hat pulled tightly on her head. Over the canvas "dodger" that broke the force of the breeze her eager face peered ahead into the darkness, where there winked those puzzling lights that the sailor-men understood with such certainty. The captain paced heavily up and down the bridge, exchanging brief remarks and monosyllabic replies with the officer of the watch. By the wheel was the dark figure of the helmsman; he scarcely stirred except in response to the brief navigation orders of the captain. These he repeated in a monotonous voice, as he gave the wheel a small fraction of a turn. His eyes were glued to the delicately poised compass-card within the binnacle, the light from which shone on his seamed and weather-beaten face.

"Soon be in now, Miss Cotton," said the captain.

" If nobody delays us we'll be berthed in an hour and a half."

" I'm sorry the voyage is over," she replied in an eager, emotional voice. " I've enjoyed every hour of it. It's been a perfect rest and made me feel a different creature."

" Splendid," jerked out the captain, and resumed his pacing.

In saying that she regretted the end of the voyage Phyllis Cotton was quite sincere. Her work at Hollywood had been exacting though lucrative; the social life she had found still more exhausting and the reverse of lucrative. She might have kept out of the whirl if she had been other than she was in temperament; but, Phyllis Cotton being Phyllis Cotton, she had done everything, met everyone, been everywhere, until finally she was utterly jaded. When she had completed her twelve months' contract she left with a feeling of relief and deliberately booked her passage on the *Vortigern* in order to have ten days in which to recover her wits and a fresh store of physical energy. Despite the fact that the sea air had made her eat plain fare with a zest and sleep like a hibernating bear for twelve hours out of every twenty-four, she had not yet made up all arrears. The last lingering trace of debility expressed itself as a vague dejection. She looked back on America and realized she was tired of it; she looked forward to England and discovered her lack of all eagerness. Having no engagements that began immediately, having lost touch with her friends for twelve months, she felt she was completely out of the running. What was she going to do with herself? Her ennui made her view her return with dismay. To think that she of all people should be reduced to such a pass, she commented to herself in introspective pity, she who had had such good times and known so many people. From this she passed naturally into a mood of regretful reminiscence and thought of past friends—Connie Watson with whom she had shared a flat and many exciting experiences; Gerald

Elkington who had given such jolly house-parties and never allowed her to miss one; Colonel and Mrs. Ramsden, both of whom were more delightful than the luxurious yacht on which they entertained so lavishly every year, and, of course, there was Trevor Craven. This last recollection deepened her mood of reminiscence: he had meant more than any of them; she would be glad to see each and all again, were it possible, but especially him.

The mild excitement of picking up the pilot distracted her thoughts. The engines stopped, the ship lost all her resolute life and was a dead thing borne forward only by the tide. The tender came alongside; the pilot caught the rope ladder and clambered aboard; the bridge telegraph clanged and once more the engines resumed their steady beat. When the pilot had taken over the navigation, the captain went below to see that his papers were in order; he suggested that Phyllis needed a hot drink to ward off the effects of the night air, but she thanked him and decided to remain where she was to see the ship enter port.

The navigation was easy. There is no formality on a tramp steamer, and so the pilot, who had already wished Phyllis good morning, paused for a moment between two turns along the bridge to ask her if she had had a good voyage.

"Fine!" she told him. "I made it a complete rest. I needed it after the States."

The pilot, too, knew the States and expressed his opinion of Yankee hustle, which created a great turmoil and worried a man without really getting ahead of the world as its authors supposed. He took a turn along the bridge and returned, his eyes unwaveringly fixed ahead on the navigation lights of the channel.

"And how is England?" asked Phyllis.

"As usual," he told her. "Everybody is grousing about something or other. Apparently there are heaps of things we ought to get excited about, only we can't manage it. But then, as a nation, we never can. Really

there has not much happened lately. Not much that matters, I mean; the papers have contrived to fill themselves out with the usual balderdash. I've a London evening paper in my pocket if you'd like it. A passenger on a small foreign boat gave it me when I brought her down before midnight. Beyond the cricket news there's nothing much except the case of two financiers who have gone dippy through handling too much money belonging to other people. The usual tale—disappearance in mysterious circumstances—the worst feared."

The pilot produced the much-folded paper as he spoke and handed it to Phyllis. She was not interested, but accepted with thanks and thrust the paper into her pocket.

He tramped back to her across the bridge and paused again. It was evidently second nature to him to make conversation in instalments.

"Queer business," he jerked out while his eyes probed the sea-way ahead of the ship. "I glanced at it, as I was attracted by one of the names. Chap called Trevor Craven. I seem to have heard of him before."

Phyllis felt her heart give a lurch of dismay. To her relief the man tramped away across the bridge without waiting for and, indeed, not expecting any comment from her.

In the few moments' respite that was hers she fought down her agitation.

"What happened?" she asked when the pilot next paused within conversational distance. Her voice, she thankfully noted, sounded quite steady and casually commonplace in tone.

"Trouble on the stock exchange over gold-mining shares, I gather," he answered. "Craven was at his week-end place all alone and his car was found smashed up at the foot of a cliff close at hand. Unlikely place for him to meet with a genuine accident. They're looking for his body in the creek."

Phyllis had been to the tower and remembered the scene; her imagination immediately reshaped the

picture, with the smashed car in position and the gruesome addition of Craven's body swilling hither and thither on the tide, his limbs slack and helpless, and the once animated face a mere white mask empty of all meaning. She did not hear the pilot go on to give particulars of Blantyre's supposed fate. Tightening her grasp on one of the iron uprights that supported the "dodger," till her fingers almost cracked, she dug her teeth into her lower lip and somehow maintained her self-control.

Fortunately they were now nearing the approach to the docks, and the pilot's attention was distracted so that he scarcely heard her scanty comment, that it all sounded very dreadful. When she saw that the men on the bridge were engrossed by their duties, she slipped below without their being immediately aware that she had gone.

Down in her cabin she read through the lurid piece of journalism that Enid Petersham had inspired, and with which she had so successfully shaken down financial apples for Craven's profit. It staggered Phyllis Cotton like a physical blow, the more so because she had felt depressed the whole evening. In another mood her common sense would have prevailed and pointed out that the news was inconclusive, and that there was a considerable chance that Craven was quite safe; but as she sat in the cabin with the paper crumpled beneath her hand, her reason put up a very poor fight against the devastating conviction that Craven had gone. "That it should happen to him of all men," she thought. "He was so daringly alive it is impossible to think of him as dead. The best friend I ever had." Her thoughts shaped themselves with such clearness and insistence that she was virtually talking to herself. "Yes, the best friend—friend first and foremost, only by accident a lover." And in her grief she reviewed the strange intimacy that had bound Craven and herself together.

Fundamentally they had been friends, friends as

children together, friends as they grew up, friends when they met again years after as man and woman, and she married to another man. It was as a friend that he had rushed to her help in his mad, adventurous way in order to secure her a divorce. Their mutual madness had ruined the scheme, and Craven had always greatly blamed himself. He had tried to insist that it was his fault; but she knew better. His gallantry was quick; but the faint, elusive touch of necessary initiative had come from herself, and she never pretended otherwise. On reflection she had been surprised that such a thing had occurred between them, for, to the best of her knowledge, neither of them had ever toyed with the thought of being married to the other.

After the contretemps in the divorce court, Craven had behaved wonderfully. Not the slightest attempt had he made to exploit the situation to gain further favours from her, nor had he sought to ignore any obligations, real or imagined. They could not marry; but he had wanted to take her abroad with him on a trip he had already planned. He had offered to abandon the trip and stay with her. He had tried to force an allowance on her. She had refused all his offers and had insisted that neither of their lives should be forcibly diverted from its natural channel to flow artificially in parallel with the other. They were naturally friends, and friends they would remain. And this they did, except for a few occasions—isolated, unsought, so rare that she could easily count them on the fingers of one hand—when the accident of their different sexes had lured them into passion.

Of all the men she had known, and her acquaintance had been wide, she felt he was the only one to whom she could have gone at any time and asked, "Will you do this for me?" and have been quite sure that, without thought of clearing past obligations or securing future favours, he would answer yes, simply because he was her friend.

And Craven was probably dead. It was not for a

love-affair that she grieved, but for the severance of a friendship that had never lost its vitality despite all separations. At the thought that she would neither see nor hear from him again she broke down and cried.

Eventually her common sense reawoke, simply because her emotion exhausted itself in tears. She saw that the news in the paper was written in exaggerated vein, and was not final; she decided that as soon as possible—it was already 3 a.m.—she would get ashore, leaving her luggage aboard ship, and ring up Craven's place for definite news. If she could get nothing definite in this way, as was probable, she would hire a car and motor to Hutton Creek—the distance was not great—and find out for herself all that was known.

CHAPTER TWENTY

PHYLLIS

CRAVEN had quite forgotten Mrs. Brunton. That worthy soul had carried away a latch-key with her the previous night, and, having set her own household in motion, arrived at the tower about eight o'clock to do the same for Craven's.

She lit the oil range, put water to boil, hunted out food, and then clambered puffing up to the living-room to give it an airing and lay the breakfast table. To her vast perturbation, she immediately lighted upon Craven still fast asleep on the settee, his feet wreathed in Enid's coat.

"God ha' mercy!" she ejaculated. "Are ye ill, Mr. Craven?"

Craven did not grasp the question; but it sufficed to awaken him. He sat up with a sudden jerk and stared at her in some bewilderment until he recollected just why he was there.

"Whatever's happened, Mr. Craven?" cried the woman, still somewhat agitated, though there was obviously nothing the matter with him.

Craven laughed. "Nothing," he said, "except that the future Mrs. Craven turned up so late and so tired last night that I had to give her my bed." He proceeded to remove his improvised coverlet, and this visible evidence of feminine invasion convinced Mrs. Brunton that she had heard aright.

"Well, I never did!" she exclaimed.

"No, I suppose not," rejoined Craven suavely, "but

it's quite all right. You're a dear soul. Take her up a cup of tea and insist upon her turning out. We've the deuce of a lot to do in London, including getting married. No time to waste. While you are up there, will you get me a change and a towel? I'll go and have a swim. Miss Petersham will want to know where the bathroom is. She'll be excited to know it's behind the kitchen, and may not believe you at first."

Mrs. Brunton did as required. Craven's pyjamas as displayed by Enid gave her staid morality another severe jolt; but she carried on and ministered faithfully to the charming stray who was about to be whisked off to London and married out of hand. About time, too, thought Mrs. Brunton, but she hoped Mr. Craven knew what he was doing.

Provided with a towel and change of underwear, Craven hurried to the boat-house, which served him as a bathing-hut and later as dressing-room. He had a lengthy swim and dallied over his dressing in order to leave the coast clear for Enid in her perambulations about the tower, and to give Mrs. Brunton ample time to prepare breakfast without the harassing thought that he was kicking his heels in impatient expectation.

The odour of fried mushrooms, ham and eggs and the aroma of hot coffee welcomed him home. The table was laid near the door; he preferred it placed close to the main window, for he never tired of the view of the sea, but accepted the arrangement rather than worry Mrs. Brunton.

Enid came in as fresh as the morning. Her eyes sparkled, but she was somewhat shy—the situation made her feel that she was somehow already half-married, but in a wholly unorthodox way. To cover her embarrassment, Craven hurried her to the table and served her with a portion she vowed she could not possibly eat, but which she nevertheless accounted for. Craven's appetite was equally good; as he explained, they had both doubtless considerable arrears to make up. He also sketched out their plans for the day.

"We'll drive up to London, Enid," he said, "as fast as that old bus of yours will carry us. We'll wear it out in getting to St. Paul's Churchyard in record time."

"Why St. Paul's Churchyard?" she demanded in surprise. "Are you taking sanctuary there?"

"No," he assured her. "Just the reverse. I want a special licence from Doctors' Commons so that we can be married before the clocks strike three to-day."

"Don't be mad," she said. "It can't be done. Those licences are only issued in special cases, I believe, and are frightfully expensive."

"This is a special case," he declared. "It's the most especial case I've ever known. The licence will be cheap at £30—I think that's about the figure."

"You'll find they'll raise all sorts of objections," she told him, not believing what she said, but finding it easier to "piffle" than be serious on this occasion.

"Not they," he maintained. "Count six fivers out in front of a lawyer, all ready for him to pick up, and he'll not talk of objections. You'll see."

"But they're not ordinary lawyers," she persisted. "There's a sort of ecclesiastical flavour about them there, I believe. They'll stand by principle and inquire if the need for a licence is really so urgent. You won't get round them."

"Ecclesiastical fiddlesticks!" he retorted. "They've no connection whatever with the Church as far as I know. It would be easy if they had. I should just tell them that the responsibility for the consequences of our not getting a licence would be like a leaden weight of sin upon their souls for ever and ever amen. That would shake them, apart from the six fivers."

"You're a perfectly dreadful man," she decided. "I don't think I'll marry you. There's a flood of wickedness in you that I've not yet plumbed."

"Yes," agreed Craven cheerfully. "I'm a thoroughly bad lot. Have some more mushrooms, my dear. They're excellent. Mrs. Brunton must have brought

them with her from the farm, fresh gathered this morning."

She accepted. Traditionally, the bride is too excited to eat on the morning of her wedding-day; but Enid could plead special circumstances. In other respects she was the normal bride. The significance of the step she was about to take was not lost on her, and although she steered clear of serious conversation, her thoughts were the reverse of frivolous. As she looked at Craven, so virile and healthy, so essentially clean, she felt proud; when she reflected on what he had proved himself to be, she decided that she was not only marrying him with hearty goodwill, but also without the slightest misgiving—she was perfectly sure of him. The recollection of her first opinion of Craven returned at this point, and she smiled. It was not so long ago that she thought him a perfect beast. Coddington's humorous account of the divorce scandal had failed to whitewash him, in fact, Coddington had not intended that it should, for there had been a certain seriousness in his ludicrous warnings that she would have to watch her step when Trevor Craven was around. How ridiculous! All that, of course, had been before she had actually met him. It all seemed so long ago and so impossible in the light of her real knowledge of him, that the recollection was utterly unreal. It was dead and done with—she banished the memory for the last time.

Craven slowly filled his pipe with tobacco and went on to talk about their affairs.

"Besides getting the licence and getting married, I'll have to go round to Silverman's and clinch our deal in Ngamyas with a cheque in full payment. Having secured that swag, round to the bank for a thick wad of ready cash and then—whither away, my love—where would you like to go for a honeymoon?"

"I don't know," she said, laughing at this headlong groom of hers, "except that I'll have to go round to my flat for some clothes, and even after that I'll be shabby and not dressed for the part."

"Nonsense! " he told her. "You're splendid as you are. I'm not marrying you for your clothes."

"Very well," she told him, with a gesture of pretended resignation. "Have it your own way. You can take me where you like."

"I'll think out something gorgeous," he assured her. "Give me a few minutes in my bedroom to hunt up a few oddments I may want and then, while you are getting ready, I'll fill up the car—she's got to fly to-day. I wish I'd a flag to stick on her radiator-cap."

His high spirits were contagious, and she laughed with him in the abandon of careless happiness. Whereupon he pulled her to her feet, kissed her, and waltzed her round the room, regardless of her recent breakfast.

"What the deuce's that? " he demanded, when at last she had made him stop.

They both listened. From below came the unmistakable sound of a voice in excited conversation with Mrs. Brunton.

"I half thought I heard a car a moment ago," said Enid, "but took no notice."

She stepped across to the window overlooking the entrance, and there, drawn up in the drive, was a large Daimler saloon with a uniformed chauffeur standing beside it. Craven's ears had detected the scurry of footsteps upon the stairway, and he turned to the door, which stood ajar. Just as he reached it, to his utter stupefaction, Phyllis Cotton appeared, chic, handsome, but wildly agitated.

She paused for one second, as though even the sight of him was too good to be credited, and then, with a glad cry, flung herself into his arms and clutched him round the neck.

"My dear! " she babbled. "Are you really all right? I thought you were dead, and my heart just turned over inside me."

Enid's whole figure stiffened, she felt as though a glacial wind had swirled into the room.

"Steady, Phyllis," said Craven, putting his arm

round her. "Don't upset yourself, old girl. There's nothing the matter. I'm as much alive as ever I was. Come and sit down," and he pulled a chair up for her.

Phyllis sat down with a gasp which expressed at one and the same time emotional relief and a physical stress that still threatened to overwhelm her by a sort of reaction. She did not notice Enid, whom, for the moment, Craven also forgot.

"Then that wretched London paper wasn't true!" said Phyllis indignantly, in a voice that still sounded somewhat strangled.

"No," admitted Craven; "it was all a stunt."

"All I can say, then," cried Phyllis wrathfully, "is that the person responsible deserves the lethal chamber as an arrant liar!"

This emphatic expression of opinion immediately made Craven reflect who was primarily responsible, and so reminded him, with a sudden shock, of Enid's presence. He nearly said "Gosh!" but managed to smother the ejaculation. He stole a look at Enid, and her tense face and rigid figure by no means reassured him; in fact, he did not like the look of her at all. Clearly, there was trouble ahead.

Phyllis had not noticed his glance, and, before he could say anything to resolve the situation, she resumed her tirade.

"Such trumped-up melodrama is an outrage. It made me feel absolutely ill. When I read it I imagined myself here again, looking out on the creek, and there you were, floating about, a pallid and horrifying corpse. I'd only been thinking about you a moment or two before, so you can imagine what a shock it was to me."

Craven desperately tried to think of something to say, but not an idea would stir in his head; furthermore, his tongue seemed to have gone stiff and dry. He found that he was silently saying "My God!" over and over again to himself.

Quick steps sounded dully on the rugs and rattled harshly on the bare portions of the oak floor. Enid

joined them. She was very pale, her eyes smouldered, and every muscle in her erect body seemed as taut as a tuned string. Her voice, however, was deadly calm.

"Mrs. Coutts-Frazer, I believe?" she said quietly.

Phyllis was startled by this sudden apparition, but was constitutionally incapable of blenching before anyone in any circumstances. Accordingly, she bowed her head slightly in curt assent.

"You have the advantage of me. Perhaps Mr. Craven will introduce us. I had no idea you or anyone else was here," she replied.

But Enid waited for no introduction—she did not give Craven a chance to speak, but hurried on herself.

"My name's Enid Petersham, and I'm on the staff of Mr. Craven's weekly. For your information, it was I who inspired the newspaper account you object to so strongly."

"Well, take what I said as said to you," rejoined Phyllis. "You ought to be made away with." She was herself really angry, and in that mood never minced matters.

"This won't do at all," broke in Craven desperately. "What Enid did was entirely for my benefit, and because she imagined it would suit my plans."

But Enid did not welcome his intervention, and cut him short with deadly precision.

"Why I did it," she said, "is ancient history. What puzzles me is why Mrs. Coutts-Frazer should be so desperately distressed."

This statement, of course, meant that Enid was not in the least puzzled.

Although Phyllis had been badly and most genuinely upset by her fears on Craven's behalf, she was beginning to rally sufficiently to realize that her unexpected arrival had somehow created an unpleasantly dramatic situation, but she had no time to sort out her ideas. Consequently, the instinct to keep her end up and not be browbeaten by this irate young creature held the field.

"It's merely," she told Enid, in a sarcastic drawl,

" that I'm one of those people who care for their friends sufficiently to be upset when anything bad happens to them. You may not understand me, but it's true."

" Please do be quiet, both of you," implored Craven, " and let me make you understand one another and so clear everything up."

" It's all perfectly clear," Enid returned icily. " There's no doubt about it, I owe Mrs. Coutts-Frazer an apology. Had I realized the quality of the friendship between you, I would certainly never have instigated that account in the newspaper. The picturesque details I supplied were doubly unfortunate as she is so familiar with the place. She imagined herself here again. I'm so sorry."

Craven exploded. " Don't be unutterably mean! " he burst out, losing his head, temper and manners simultaneously. " I understand what you mean, and let me tell you, you are completely wrong with that last suggestion. Listen to me," and he seized her arm above the elbow with a grip that unintentionally was fierce enough to make her wince. " Sorry," he apologized, though without loosing her, " but you've got to hear. Phyllis Cotton is my oldest and dearest friend, and I hope I do not flatter myself in thinking I stand the same with her. In the circumstances, it was perfectly natural for her to be upset and rush round to inquire. I should have done the same myself. Does that satisfy you? "

" No, it does not! " she retorted hotly, wrenching her arm free. " I've not asked for an explanation of how you two stand to one another, and I don't want one. For that matter, it's not necessary. She rushes round; you would do the same. That puts the matter in a nutshell. But what amazes me—and I think I'm entitled to be amazed—is that in the last few months you should have so completely overlooked the existence of this precious friendship and its significance in your own life. It's a good thing you have re-discovered it. Think it over. I'm off back to London. Good-bye! " and she flung towards the door.

Phyllis Cotton sprang swiftly to her feet and stopped Enid before she could escape. While Craven and Enid made their exchange of acrimonious remarks, she had had time to size up the situation, and all the generosity of her friendship for Craven asserted itself, and blotted out every other consideration. Apparently, by her headlong arrival and emotional display, she had put a nasty spoke in the wheel of a serious love-affair. Well, she would try to right the matter.

"Just a minute, Miss Petersham," she said in a quiet voice. "Just one question. What is Trevor Craven to you?"

This was honestly put, and the impulse behind it was generous; but the question was so downright that to Enid, in her state of outraged feeling, it seemed gross impudence.

"I'm not prepared to discuss my affairs with you," she flared out in reply. "I suggest you ask Mr. Craven yourself—I imagine you know him well enough."

She darted afresh towards the door, and this time almost made her escape. Phyllis Cotton was just too quick—she slammed the door, turned the key, and, slipping it out of the lock, thrust it down the neck of her dress.

"No, not yet," she declared emphatically. "If you get away now I may have the pair of you on my conscience for the rest of my days. We'll thrash this matter out down to the last straw now. As you won't talk, Trevor shall. Now, Trevor," she said, turning to him with the utmost earnestness, "in the name of all the decency in our friendship, I ask you, what are you and Miss Petersham to one another?"

"We were just going up to London to get married when you came in," he replied, giving her the simple, brutal truth as she had demanded it.

Enid flung herself into a chair by the table and propped her chin on her hands.

"Get it over," she said, "and perhaps when you've both finished you'll allow me to go. I've not been

accustomed, as a guest, to fight my way out to my car. I'll wait, but please be quick."

Phyllis Cotton seemed scarcely to have heard her, but rather to have been engrossed in weighing the significance of Craven's last words.

"Just going to London," she repeated. "I'm so sorry, Trevor." And turning to Enid, "You poor kid, no wonder you are wild at having me turn up like a disreputable ghost to spoil the feast. Nothing would have got me here if I had known. But in coming as I did, I was quite honest. I came because, as he himself said, I value him as my oldest and dearest friend. That you must believe, my dear. Somehow I've got to make you."

Quite ignoring Craven, as she spoke, she moved towards Enid and sat down opposite to her at the narrow table. The eyes of the two women met without wavering. On the one side there was distrust, anger and hostility; on the other there was frank generosity and a passionate desire to conciliate.

Craven chewed at his unlighted pipe. He felt angry, frustrated and extremely foolish, and realized that he had at last encountered a situation that was quite beyond him. As he silently phrased it, no man could handle two women at once, he might as well give it up. This procedure of thrashing the matter out he particularly distrusted. Phyllis meant well; but he was quite sure she would very soon be quarrelling violently with Enid, and Enid with her. Women could not help it, he knew.

Phyllis was nervous and mechanically rolled a few breadcrumbs she found into small round pellets beneath her restless fingers. She did not know she was doing it. However, she spoke very quietly, with a persuasive, vibrant quality in her voice.

"I don't think you realize, Miss Petersham, how long Trevor and I have known each other. My first recollection of him is when I was a raw kid of ten or eleven, with two long plaits of hair down my back. He used to take me in an old punt to shoot rats along the river

with an airgun. It was most exciting. Occasionally we fell in and had to rescue one another."

"Very interesting," broke in Enid coldly, "but I don't see the immediate point of the reminiscence."

"Just this," replied Phyllis patiently, "that being such kids, it was impossible for us to be anything but purely and simply friends. And beginning thus, we grew up along those lines. In our later teens we had love-affairs with other youngsters, but told our troubles to one another when we met. We were friends. Trevor went to the 'varsity and then abroad; I went on the stage and married another man. When we met again we were still friends. It was as a friend that Trevor came to my assistance."

"And there the argument peters out," remarked Enid scathingly.

"You're wrong," Phyllis told her in a quiet voice that was yet absolutely emphatic. "I'm not pretending that the judge was not justified in refusing my divorce petition; he was, and for the reason stated; but we soon abandoned our *affaire*, and of its few occasions not one coincided with any of my visits to this tower, as you hinted. Trevor and I found ourselves friends again, fundamentally friends and nothing more nor less—whichever you prefer. We went our separate ways and followed our own careers. I've been in the States at the same time that he has been in Tibet. To-day is the first time we've seen one another for over eighteen months, and in that time we've exchanged a couple of picture post cards."

"You're taking refuge behind a word," Enid told her. "You speak of friendship, but use the word to cover far more than would anyone else. In effect, you are merely trying to throw dust in my eyes and blind me to the facts of what has happened. Open that door, please," and she ostentatiously picked up her coat and bag.

Enid's tone and her own obvious failure to pacify her nettled Phyllis, whose patience in normal circumstances was not notably long-suffering.

"The facts of what has happened!" she gibed, effecting a complete *volte-face* in tactics. "You'll quarrel with Trevor over what occurred three years ago, before he knew of your existence! I wouldn't have thought it possible in these days to find such squeamish prudery. You make me feel sick!"

"Open the door," said Enid.

"And, of course, you feel you would be cheated if you married Trevor now—you wouldn't be securing your due in the marriage market."

"Open the door," repeated Enid, as though she had not heard a word since she made the request before.

"The fact of the matter is," added Phyllis venomously, "you're too self-centred to know what love is. The idea of taking a man, just because you want him and he wants you, is something you simply don't understand."

Enid walked over to the window and flung open the lattice with sufficient noise to attract the attention of the chauffeur below.

"Would you mind coming up here?" she called to him in a clear, ringing voice. "One of these old locks seems to have sprung across and jammed. We can't get out."

"Certainly, miss," he replied.

But before he arrived Phyllis had opened the door, and Enid, meeting the man on the stairs, turned him back with a word of thanks.

Craven made to follow her immediately; but Phyllis stopped him.

"Let her go," she said. "She won't listen to anything you have to say until she has had time to get over this. I've told her the whole truth, which is what she wanted, and although she wouldn't admit it, even to herself, she's believed everything I've said. Of course, the last three insults I threw at her are not true; but as corrosive blisters to reduce her pig-headed obstinacy and pride, they'll do her a lot of good."

"The poor kid," muttered Craven, as he gently but

firmly unclasped Phyllis's fingers from his arm. "I can't let her go like that."

He hurried after Enid; but, as before breakfast he had unlocked the garage to get the boat-house key which was kept there, she had been able to secure her car without delay. She drove past him without betraying by the slightest sign that she noticed his presence. He watched till her car had disappeared up the drive, and then, turning, climbed with somewhat leaden feet back to the living-room of the tower, where Phyllis awaited the full explanation of all that had occurred.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

GIVING HER HER HEAD

CRAVEN lost some considerable time in explaining things to Phyllis until it struck him that, as he had no car, he was dependent upon her to give him a lift back to civilization, and that he could explain just as well while they motored towards Southampton. His suggestion to go suited her plans too, so they finished the conversation in the car.

She advised him to go back to London immediately, and if possible discover where Enid was, but to be in no great hurry to thrust himself upon her.

"Even when I've allowed for your partiality," she told him, her eyes twinkling mischievously, "from what you tell me I really think you must have picked a winner. It's more than you deserve, so play the game or the gods will go back on you—likewise Enid, whose susceptibilities have been badly ruffled. She'll come round; but you'll have to give her time."

At Southampton they separated, for she did not know how long it would take to collect her luggage and get it through the Customs, and he on the other hand, by going to the station immediately, could just catch an express for London. They promised to meet in the next day or so.

On his arrival at Waterloo he drove straight to the office of the *Woman's Sphere*. The news, that the reports in yesterday's paper needed revision, was evidently abroad, for Craven found the "cattle pen"

in the possession of a reporter who was demanding to see him, and had just electrified the staff with the information that their startling employer was not yet safely at rest in a watery grave. He ejected him with two curt phrases, glared at the girls—a thing he had never done before—so that they scuttled back to their desks, and then savagely made his way upstairs.

He had no sooner got into his room than Silverman rang up—for the third time that morning, he stated—to see if Craven was in. More because there was nothing else he could do rather than that he felt any exhilaration at securing control of Ngamya Goldfields Ltd., he hurried round to Silverman's and settled the deal.

In great gloom he ate a solitary and belated lunch and, when he returned to the office, was infuriated to find that during his absence Enid had stalked in, collected a few personal belongings, and told Tubby Burton that she had finished with the firm, which could keep the month's salary due to her in lieu of notice. Forgetting Phyllis's advice, he immediately taxied round to her flat, fully expecting to bring her to bay. The place was locked up and he could make no one hear—that is, supposing there was anyone inside. This was by no means impossible, and the thought, that Enid might be contemptuously watching his discomfiture, increased his annoyance. "Damn her," he decided, and drove away to his own flat.

Here he found a number of letters, none of which interested him much, and also a telegram from his valet, asking leave till Tuesday evening as his mother's recovery was still not assured. Craven immediately telephoned a wire telling him to stay as long as he found necessary. Being determined that business should oust all thoughts of Enid, he proceeded to write to Coddington, concerning whom he had reached one of those lightning decisions which were his habitual business practice. Pulling a sheet of stationery out of the rack, he contemplated it for a moment as though he were

planning the letter on its blank surface, and then wrote forthwith:

"DEAR MR. CODDINGTON,—I count myself very fortunate that the hurly-burly of this last week-end has introduced us to one another, and I hope that what I have to propose will appeal to you as much as it does to me. As a result of recent purchases in the share market I have secured control of Ngamya Goldfields Ltd., and, indeed, hold the bulk of the shares. You know as well as I do what are the possibilities of this concern, and that it only needs expert guidance to make it thoroughly prosperous. Will you undertake to supply this deficiency? It is difficult at the moment to look far into the future, nor do I know whether you would welcome a long contract or not. As a preliminary, I therefore offer you £2,000 and passage by air service if you will go out for six months, with full powers to redirect the mining activities of the company, and generally reorganize its management on the technical side. If there is to be a Mrs. Coddington in the immediate future, as seemed not unlikely to me, then, of course, the allowance for passage includes her, too, if desired. Ngamya is a delightful country in which to learn the ways of early married life.

"Yours sincerely,
"TREVOR CRAVEN."

He also filled in a claim against his insurance company for the loss of his car, at the same time determining that, if they were able to re-claim damages from Coddington, he would waive it. This reminded him that he was without a car himself, so he rang up the firm with which he usually dealt and bargained for a good saloon to be sent round immediately on hire. In this he later drove round to his club, where he listened to the chaff of his friends and ultimately dined. They made him celebrate his return from the dead in champagne, and the company in the end

became rather hilarious; but never for a moment was Craven able to banish the thought of how very differently he had planned to spend that evening—"I'll think out something gorgeous," he had said. What a fiasco!

Next day he tried Enid's flat once more, with the same negative result. Seeing a petrol filling-station with a mews behind converted into lock-up garages, he drew a bow at a venture and walked in.

"I've just called round at Miss Petersham's place, but find it shut. She garages here, I believe; perhaps you can tell me if she is out of town."

"Yes, sir," the man told him. "I should guess she is. Anyway, she came in here last night and filled up with twelve gallons, so it looked as though she reckoned on going a pretty long run."

Craven gave him half a crown and gloomily agreed. In addition to the annoyance of not being able to find Enid, he was also worried by the thought that she might be short of money. If she lived up to her salary, as was probable, she might be without much reserve. He did not imagine she was starving, but he hated the thought of her wondering what she should do when the £50, or the £100, or whatever she had was spent.

When he got down to the office he went into Tubby Burton's room.

"How are we going to manage now Miss Petersham has gone?" he asked.

"As best we can, I suppose," said Tubby. "Nobody is irreplaceable, but it is a bit of a jolt when they clear out like that. Fortunately, Miss Bray, who has worked with her, is thoroughly competent. She doesn't write the same stuff—no two people do—but give her time, and, in her own way, she'll be just as good."

"Right," said Craven. "How much does she get?"

"Three hundred pounds."

"And Miss Petersham?"

"Five hundred pounds," said Tubby.

"Well," decided Craven, "promote Miss Bray

temporarily and give her £400. Tell her that if she can hold the job down and Miss Petersham does not return in three months it's hers at £500. Take on any extra help you want lower down in the office. I leave that to you.

"Now as regards Miss Petersham. To leave without giving notice is irregular, but I'm not inclined to withhold her month's salary. That sort of thing does not appeal to me. How much does it come to exactly?"

Tubby looked it up. "There's a small claim for expenses of 14s. 9d.; that makes £42 8s. 1d. altogether. Shall I post the cheque round to her flat?"

"No," said Craven, "she's cleared out of London. If you know where she banks, we'll pay it into her account."

"Same place as ourselves," Tubby told him.

"Then it's easy," Craven remarked. "I've got to go in myself after lunch, and will attend to it then."

Craven ate his lunch without much appreciation of its quality; his mind was engrossed in calculation, and in weighing the pros and cons of policy. He finally made up his mind in time to enjoy the cheese and biscuits and coffee.

On entering the bank he sent in his card with a request to see the manager. The clerk returned. "Mr. Philips is at liberty and will see you now, sir," he said. Craven went in; he and the manager were quite good friends. They shook hands and Philips motioned Craven into a chair.

"The stormy petrel has returned, then," he remarked, with a sly smile.

"Yes," said Craven, "I've weathered the storm, and am now smoothing out my ruffled plumes."

"Your ruffled plumes," laughed the manager. "What about other people's? We've just about got the whole tale by now, you know. It's gone the rounds."

"So I suppose," admitted Craven. "I'll tell you the true facts some day just to abase you, but not now.

I'm in a hurry, so incline your benign and confidential ear. I believe our Miss Petersham banks with you."

"Yes," agreed Philips, sitting up in surprise—the topic was the very last he would have expected.

"Well," explained Craven, "not to make a mystery of the affair, she had a thundering row with us yesterday and cleared out on the spot, leaving her dues of salary behind her to comfort us instead of legal notice. I think she's foolish, but I can understand her attitude. In any case there's no question of my retaining her month's salary—I don't do that sort of thing—so I want to pay it into her account as the only means I know of getting it to her."

"That's easy," remarked Philips. "How much is it?"

"Forty-two pounds odd," said Craven, "but at the same time there's another payment I want to make. She recently afforded me the most amazing help; in fact she showed herself a deuced sight quicker on the uptake than I am myself. At the time I gave her a verbal promise that she should have a substantial share of whatever came along. Our disagreement does not alter that promise, and I want to settle up for that too."

"And what's that amount to?" asked Philips.

"Thinking it out carefully, I decided," announced Craven, "that £15,000 about meets the case."

"Fifteen thousand pounds!" cried the manager. "She must have made you a fortune."

"She has," admitted Craven. "She's a pearl of great price, that girl. I won't rest till I find her again."

Philips could not recover from his astonishment.

"You want to pay £15,042 odd into her account!" he jerked out. "Look here, Craven, forgive the question, but this isn't another of your unholy stunts, is it?"

"No," Craven assured him. "Honour bright. It's all square and above-board. In fact, knowing you as I do, I don't mind telling you the real situation. It's not my fault that I didn't marry her yesterday. I'm worried because I don't know how she's fixed for

money, and in any case, I think the quickest way to get her to come back is to give her her head completely. There you have everything in a nutshell."

"All right," agreed Philips. "We'll put the matter through. But I've never known anything quite so romantic before. I shall treasure this and publish it as a veiled anecdote in my memoirs, when I'm an old man and retire from the Governorship of the Bank of England."

"I doubt it," rejoined Craven. "When that happy time comes you'll probably find it necessary to lie low in some country which has no extradition treaty with these islands, and I shall tell my children about you as an awful warning."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

UNCLE GEORGE'S triumphant return to Whitehall with the signed but grimy typescript that now represented Coddington's official report might have been expected to bring peace, where, for a long time, no peace had been. It did nothing of the sort. Just the reverse; in its effect it might have been the last ingredient in a witch's cauldron to wind up the charm. No sooner was it safe in the official archives than the brew boiled over.

When they had not been in a position to publish the report, because it had disappeared, ministers had played for safety and suavely temporized with their political assailants; for what they most feared was that the trumped-up scandal should swell to such dimensions that they would be forced to lay bare all the facts and admit that the report had been whisked away from under their noses. Now they had once more an authoritative, signed copy, they felt safe, snapped their fingers at their opponents, and bluntly declared they would not be forced into publication against their considered judgment by the concerted yells of the riff-raff—all this in parliamentary language.

The resultant scene in the Commons had many of the classic features of an Irish fair. The fact that saved the situation was that there is no loose furniture in the House; practically everything is a fixture, and cannot be thrown about. Nevertheless, many people began to incline towards Fascism as a gentler and more

humane method of reaching political decisions. The Upper House beheld all this with horror, and burst into a refined perspiration. The hired legions of the press joined in the party fray, and the air was thick with verbal brickbats. The Conservatives denounced the Socialists; the Labour Party exposed the Tories; the Liberal Party trenchantly exposed the errors of both the other factions and patted itself on the back. Two very promising actions for libel were started, and one for criminal slander. There was only one actual casualty: a Liberal editor discovered, after going to press, that in the process of "having it both ways," he had contradicted himself three times in the same leader. It was too late to do anything—in that last moment of clarified vision he died of apoplexy.

The basic fact underlying all this turmoil was that the market in gold-mining shares, always very speculative, had been wildly agitated, and money had ebbed and flowed in tides of devastating magnitude. The shares of Ngamya Goldfields Ltd. had merely been the most conspicuous; scores of others had been affected.

A frenzy almost invaded the tranquil regions of Whitehall. Relieved of their helpless anxiety by having the report once more beneath their hand, the mandarins had leisure to realize how great and justifiable was their wrath that the report had ever been stolen. Furthermore, George Neil's account of how he had recovered the latest copy from unholy hands gave them a pointer as to what people had been interested in swaying the market. Among these nimble wits was assuredly to be found the one with nimble fingers who had spirited the Whitehall copy away in the first place. The case was re-opened and investigated afresh from the start. Discreet help was secured from Scotland Yard. The consequences of this were annoying in the extreme for a number of people.

George Neil, who had expected undiluted praise in unsparing quantity from all quarters, found himself badgered by detectives and cross-examined on his story

until he developed an inferiority complex and wondered whether he was suspect. His account, of course, brought in Coddington and Mabel Renshaw. These two could not very well refuse to repeat and corroborate what they had already told Uncle George, but they felt very embarrassed, for they realized all the time that they were implicating Craven more and more, and they had jointly accepted his offer to go out to Ngamya to combine a honeymoon and business in one trip. They also had to mention Enid Petersham, and the detectives were very annoyed to find that this further prospective victim for cross-examination had apparently vanished into thin air. They turned on Craven and found him at his best—as grave, dignified and uncommunicative as the Sphinx. They accordingly investigated his bank accounts and found he had paid £15,000 to the Miss Enid Petersham already mentioned. Truly, she was a very interesting person.

The detectives distinctly did not like Craven; no more did they like Blantyre, of whom, by this time, they had already heard much. They did not badger him directly, however, but concentrated on his two men who had been on the *Corsair* at Texemouth. They subjected them to as nasty a cross-examination as is possible in a country that does not recognize third degree methods. What would happen to them if they breathed a word about their examination to anyone, particularly to Blantyre, was also luridly explained to them. One man—the one, incidentally, who had blabbed most—was cowed; the other—Clayte, by name—was of sterner stuff. He was the one who had insisted upon the bold and drastic course of holding Mabel Renshaw on the *Corsair* till Blantyre could deal with her. Having assured the detectives that the grave would have nothing on him in the way of silence, he promptly warned Blantyre. Blantyre was terror-stricken; he had a good many financial skeletons in his past, and an investigation might inadvertently resurrect them. His thoughts immediately turned to the possible necessity for flight.

Without much trouble he persuaded his henchman to re-victual and fully fuel the *Corsair*, which they quietly moved on a night tide up a desolate creek a few miles from Texemouth.

Silverman, Craven's enthusiastic stock-broker, and Hallam of the *National Echo*, who had written up the melodramatic account of the disappearance of Blantyre and Craven, both came in for attention. What they had to say made Miss Enid Petersham seem a still more desirable acquaintance.

By this time the detectives had gathered together a great deal of information, but they were still a long way from being able to sort it out and allot the responsibility for all that had occurred. The villain of the piece was certainly Craven or Blantyre; but they could not be sure which, and until that was decided they could not push on further and endeavour to discover who had stolen the original report. If they could get hold of Miss Petersham and make her talk, they might learn just that little more which would make all the difference. Where was she? In hiding, of course. After much discussion it was decided that the time was ripe for a change of tactics —a little determined publicity would probably unearth her and scare her into doing or saying something foolish. Such conduct on her part would probably lead others to do the same. Scotland Yard decided to drop its secrecy and come boldly into the open.

All this time Enid was peacefully immured in a small village on the Avon, a few miles above Salisbury. There was no mystery or secrecy about this: she had taken refuge with a distant cousin and close friend of her mother's, merely because she felt she must have sympathy and quiet. Violet Davenant, although she refused the title of aunt, had always stood very much in that relation to Enid, who instinctively turned to her when she felt the hurly-burly of her recent fortunes overwhelming. She found all that she sought. Miss Davenant listened patiently to her outpourings and commented sympathetically without encouraging her to

develop any maudlin self-pity. She also contrived to get her to eat and sleep to a reasonable extent. In a few days Enid recovered her common sense. From what she took to be broken-hearted disappointment in Craven, she advanced to a mood of exasperated annoyance, and, finally, was well on the way to realizing that she had made a mountain out of a mole-hill in the matter of his recent attitude to Phyllis Cotton. This was confirmed within the week by one of the picture papers, which reproduced a picture of the film star leaving for Switzerland.

"Miss Cotton is sure a 'go-getter,'" the paper explained in the jargon of Hollywood. "Within a week of landing from the States, she has hustled herself into the business of saving the film 'No Such Man,' which has been hung up by the sudden death of Miss Graham," etc.

Enid, however, refused to indulge in any vain regret that she had cleared out so precipitously.

"Editing a paper is a treadmill job," she declared. "Now I've broken loose I'll keep free of it and see if I can do some really fresh and original writing. In an office you don't get a chance to see what you can really do; you are everlastingly having to break off to deal with some boring and drab piece of routine. As for Craven, I believe he was merely carried away by excitement into offering to marry me—a reward for a clever girl. Anyhow, to be married by one's employer is rather like the beggar maid's elevation by King Cophetua. The condescension enshrined in that poem always put grit between my teeth." In short, she decided to drop the past and start afresh—when she had had a short rest.

To forget the immediate past was not very easy, for she took a keen interest in current affairs and habitually read the papers—for what they were worth. Consequently, the storm in Parliament and in the Press, which circled round the recent upheaval in the market for gold-mining shares, did not escape her notice. She

was aghast to discover the dimensions of the uproar which she and Craven had helped with others to create. The remembrance of Craven's airy indifference to what anyone might do, say, or think, did not altogether reassure her. It struck her that there might be unpleasant consequences yet to come, either from Blantyre, who had been worsted so badly, or from those authorities that seemed so enraged. She wondered if the proprietors of the *National Echo* could get at her for utilizing the paper as a cat's-paw in the game. She decided philosophically that, in any case, they could not hang her, and refused to worry. She was curious, however, to know if there had been any attempt to communicate with her at her flat, for she had made no provision for letters to be forwarded. Accordingly she wrote to a friend, enclosing her Yale key, and asked her to keep a discreet eye on the flat, and send down any letters that had accumulated for her.

At the week-end Violet Davenant had to go away for several days to Bristol to make a long-promised visit she had already postponed twice. She was most apologetic to Enid, who, however, assured her that if she did not go, her own stay was over, for she would not plant herself on anyone to their inconvenience. With mild sarcasm, she also reassured Violet that she would not burn any milk in her aluminium saucepans, and would see that the girl came in not later than ten o'clock on her evenings off. In face of this, Miss Davenant had to go, and departed on the Saturday morning at 11.30.

The rest of the day Enid was destined to remember very clearly.

At midday the postman knocked at the door with a bulky envelope that would not go through the letter-box slit. It was the parcel of letters forwarded from her flat in London. Apart from circulars and a few bills, there were several things that would have interested her, had it not been for one letter which completely swept everything else out of her head. This

communication was from her bank manager, Philips, who informed her in a personal letter that Craven had paid in her monthly cheque to the amount of £42 8s. 1d., and also a sum of £15,000, which he conceived as due to her for her services to him, and which he hoped she would find adequate to meet the verbal agreement he had made with her recently.

Enid was not unduly obsessed with the importance of money, and it was the suddenness of the news, rather than this accession of wealth, that made her gasp. Her head spun with the surprise. Immediately she began to think, her brain whirled afresh. Again, it was not the money itself, but the perplexity of deciding what significance was to be placed upon this amazing action of Craven's. It raised again the problem which had never been really settled, which had never more than slept—the problem of what was their real attitude to one another. Why had he done it? She realized that the trick she had turned must ultimately make a great deal of money for him. But employers were not usually so generous in rewarding service. He, of course, was constitutionally and habitually generous; everybody who knew him was well aware of that. But was it just pure generosity? Might he not be paying up lavishly in order to be free of her with a clear conscience? She swiftly decided that this construction was mean, and that no such motive could possibly underlie his action. He was the type of man who, if he was breaking off an affair and clearing out, would definitely say so, and state why. She was puzzled.

Her mind switched over to the question as to whether she was going to keep the money or return it. She did not know, for she did not know what was her attitude to him, and that determined everything. To have the money would be delightful, for, together with what she already had, it would make her as a bachelor girl comfortably independent, even if she earned no more with her pen—a possibility she did not admit. Independent. The word had a pleasant ring, and she

slowly savoured its comforting significance. As she did so, it struck her that Craven might have interpreted his obligation so generously in order to make her independent. He had seized the opportunity to do this in order that she might be a free agent in every respect; possibly his sensitive nature hated the thought of playing the part of King Cophetua, who was probably accepted as a very welcome escape from poverty. Craven she knew to be innately proud, and to be accepted for his possessions rather than for himself would be gall and wormwood to him. He would want no woman except on the basis that she wanted him. But did he want her? If so, why had he not hunted her up already? Did she want him?

She gave herself a resolute mental shake and decided that all this was foolish sentimentalizing. She would think the whole matter out on strictly common-sense lines and toy with no absurd fancies. Beginning resolutely, she weighed the reasons for and against accepting so much money—and in five minutes she had forgotten the money and was again thinking of Craven himself. So it went on until the maid interrupted her thoughts by coming in to lay tea just before five.

When the girl came in later to clear away, Enid was relieved to discover that she had eaten something, and so escaped comment from the maid, but exactly what she had eaten she had no clear idea. The clock struck six, which meant it was three minutes to the hour and time to switch on the radio for the news. The wireless service is greatly valued and regularly used in the country.

"Shall I switch on the set, miss?" asked the girl.

"Yes, if you want it," said Enid absently.

"Thank you, miss. I like to hear the news while I'm clearing up." She switched on the set and continued her work.

The set hummed quietly for a few moments; there came that faint, rustling sound which heralds a speaker,

and then one of the well-known voices broke the silence.

"This is the National Programme from London. Before reading the weather forecast and first general news, here is a police message.

"Will Miss Enid Petersham, P-e-t-e-r-s-h-a-m, of 16 Waverton Road, Hampstead, or anyone who knows her present whereabouts, please communicate immediately with New Scotland Yard, Telephone, Whitehall 1212, or the nearest police station?"

Enid stood petrified. The girl was just carrying away a dish of raspberry jam in one hand and the remains of a plate of bread and butter in the other. She stopped dead. The dish fell to the floor with a crash and the plate tilted, so that the slices of bread and butter followed suit. Her large, bovine brown eyes opened wide, becoming almost circular, and her bottom jaw dropped.

The suave, imperturbable voice of the announcer continued:

"In case this young lady, who was last heard of at her address six days ago, should be wandering, suffering from loss of memory, the following is her description. Age twenty-six. Height about five feet seven inches. Slim and graceful build. Hair and eyes dark; olive complexion. Very smartly dressed, and may be driving an old model Austin Twelve Saloon, Registration Number, OY 3948. To repeat; will she, or anyone knowing her present whereabouts, please communicate with New Scotland Yard, Telephone, Whitehall 1212, or the nearest police station?"

The girl put her foot in the jam, gave a convulsive gasp, and then burst out in a cracked quaver:

"The police! Oh, miss, what have you bin doing?"

This restored Enid. "Don't be a fool," she snapped. "Pull yourself out of that jam and clean the mess up. It must be a mistake." She switched off the set.

She knew, however, that it was most certainly not

a mistake. Her previous misgivings crowded back. Here, she decided, was the trouble she had half expected all along, and her activities would take some explaining away if they were of sufficient moment to warrant a reward of £15,000. Craven's generosity had made things worse. That train of thought led her immediately to her line of action. Without a second's delay she turned to the telephone in the hall and put in a trunk call for Green Park 2467. At that time on Saturday there was not much pressure on the telephone service, and in little more than five minutes she was through.

"Is that Mr. Trevor Craven's?" she asked.

"It's the porter's box at the flats. Who is it speaking?"

"I'm a member of Mr. Craven's office staff—the *Woman's Sphere*, you know—and I wanted to speak to him on a matter of urgent business."

"Sorry, miss. He's away," returned the porter.

"I was afraid he might be," said Enid, "as I know he often goes out of town for the week-end. Do you happen to know where he has gone? It might be possible to get him on the phone."

"The usual spot, miss. That week-end place of his, the tower. I believe it's on the phone, but I don't know the number."

"Never mind," said Enid, "that puts me right. Thanks very much," and she rang off before he could again ask for her name.

A difficulty now presented itself. She could not for the life of her remember Craven's number at the tower. While she was pondering the details she would have to give to the telephone exchange for them to look up the number, it occurred to her that, if she was in doubtful case with the police, Craven certainly was too, and that, if she called him up in this conspicuous fashion, anyone instructed to take note of Craven's calls could not possibly overlook this one. Her ready imagination immediately supplied the picture of a plain-clothes sleuth, with telephone clamped over his

ears, taking down their conversation verbatim. As opposed to this, the tower was only about thirty-five miles away by road. She could be there in an hour and a half, and need not use her own car either, since it shared with herself the opprobrium of being advertised for in a police broadcast message; she could take Violet's Armstrong Siddeley, which was also much faster.

She lost no time in acting on this idea. Having told the maid she would have to stay in, she hurriedly donned a beret and mackintosh, grabbed all her ready money, which amounted to about £15, and hurried round to the garage at the rear of the house. There was fortunately plenty of petrol in Violet's saloon, and in a few minutes she was whirling down the valley road to Salisbury as fast as the winding of the road, which followed the river, would permit. She could not avoid going through Salisbury, and the Saturday crowds in the main streets made the business of getting along exasperatingly slow. But once she was through and on the road to Downton, she let the car out and it steadily ate up the miles to Fording Bridge and Ringwood. Beyond Winkton she had to leave the main road, and thereafter slackened speed on inferior roads. Nevertheless it was barely eight o'clock when, with considerable relief, she turned into the steep track that ran through Craven's land down to the tower.

She took the gradient with caution at a slow speed. Already she was relaxing in the expectation of reaching Craven in a few minutes and casting all her troubles on him. Suddenly a man slipped out of the bushes beside the track, about eight yards ahead, and signalled for her to stop. He looked like a constable, but was in plain clothes. She had that last fact for excuse, and in any case, to her certain knowledge, there had been too much rough work in that neighbourhood for her to take any chances. She was stopping for no one. Blowing a terrific blast on her horn, she accelerated and made the man jump for dear life. The car took

the rest of the gradient with a leap. Enid overshot the tower and carried on down to the boat-house before she could pull up. And there she found Craven tinkering with his launch. As she leapt out of the car she saw in the distance a determined figure racing down the drive in her direction. If the man dared follow in that fashion, then certainly he was a plain-clothes officer. She dashed across to Craven, who could scarcely believe his eyes and merely stood in the launch and looked at her.

"The police are after me," she cried.

"The devil they are," he said. "I've been plagued with those gentry myself. Jump in quick. We'll go and have a chat while we've got the chance."

She needed no second invitation, but landed in the launch with a flying leap that set it swaying wildly. Craven steadied her, sprang into the wheel-house, got the launch going, and was forty yards away, slicing through the waters of the creek at full speed, before Enid's pursuer had reached the boat-house.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

ALL AT SEA

"WELL, that's beaten him," remarked Craven, "whoever he is. Have a cigarette to pull yourself together, and then tell me all about it. There's plenty of time, and it's just the evening for a run. We'll go right out for four or five miles and loiter round generally for about an hour."

"Thanks," she said.

He lit her cigarette, slipped his arm round her, smiled, and gave her a reassuring hug. As their eyes met she smiled in turn and felt all her troubles drop into annihilation.

"I might never have been away," she thought. "We seem to have straightway slipped back to where we were."

"Why not sit down?" suggested Craven. "You look rather tired." He pulled forward a cane chair for her; she gladly accepted it.

Everything seemed to Enid almost unbelievably peaceful. The flood tide was full, and in the absence of any wind the sea was perfectly calm, only a long, slow swell faintly heaved its glassy surface. Away to their right, for they were heading southward out to sea, the sun was sinking low, and its light beginning to redden into sunset. High in the eastern sky there hung motionless a colossal bank of clouds which rose in fold after fold like some range of fantastic hills, whose heights and depths were picked out in exaggerated

contrast by the evening light and enriched by its benediction of colour.

She felt loath to talk, although there was so much to discuss; Craven was evidently content to await her time, so she finished her cigarette in silence. At last she tossed the glowing stub through the open sunshine roof of the launch and came to business.

"Did you listen in at six o'clock this evening?" she asked.

"No," said Craven, slowing down the engine to make talking easier. "I'm one of those stupid people who only turn on the radio as it were by accident, or when they have absolutely nothing else to do. Did I miss something good to-night?"

"You did," she told him. "A police message asking for my whereabouts; the information to be supplied by myself or anyone who knew to Scotland Yard or the nearest police station."

"Splendid!" was his ironical comment. "I hope they gave one of those clever thumb-nail sketches which seem like instructions for designing a Dutch doll."

"That was there, too," she admitted, "in case I was 'wandering, suffering from loss of memory'—that was how they put it. There was also an insulting reference to the age of my car, and they gave its number. Accordingly, I came in Violet's Armstrong Siddeley."

"Who's Violet?" demanded Craven tersely.

Enid pulled up in her narrative. "Oh, of course, there are a lot of things you will want explained. I'd better begin from where I saw you last."

"Please," he asked.

Briefly, but without neglecting necessary detail, she gave him a clear account of her doings since she left him. The sudden activity of the police was the most important item in all this, and she naturally asked him what he thought about it.

In reply, he explained how he, too, had been badgered by them, and gave it as his opinion that they were hunting for the original villain of the piece who

stole the copies of Coddington's report, namely Blantyre.

"You told them it was Blantyre?" she remarked.

"No, I didn't," he told her, with one of those light, hilarious laughs that betrayed his madcap spirit.

"Why ever not?" she demanded in surprise.

Craven laughed again, somewhat sheepishly, as though he realized the impossibility of squaring his behaviour with common sense.

"In the first place," he explained, "I didn't cotton on to the detective who tried to put me through the hoop. His school tie wasn't the same as mine. Secondly, Blantyre and myself are pet enemies, and personally, I don't want to let any third party into our feud. It would spoil it and look as though I needed help to see it to a conclusion. Finally—but I've only just thought of this reason—however sure I may feel, I don't positively know that he arranged to have the original copy stolen."

"You're mad, quite mad," Enid decided, "and the result is that the police, ready to turn anywhere in the hope of fresh evidence, proceed to hunt me down just in case I may be able to tell them something."

"They couldn't have done a better thing," Craven told her, "for they've driven you helter-skelter back to me. I'm most obliged to them. When we get . . . Hallo . . . hallo!" He broke off suddenly, a look of amazed excitement on his face at what he had glimpsed through the stern windows. Jumping on to one of the seats, he thrust his head and shoulders through the open sunshine roof. "It is," he declared. "I thought I recognized her. Here comes the jolly old *Corsair* herself. The evening has tempted friend Blantyre for a run, and he has floated out on the flood-tide like ourselves. But what's he in such a hurry for? There wasn't a police message about him, was there?"

"Not that I heard," replied Enid, who had jumped on to the opposite seat. "But isn't he coming too close?"

"Cutting it a bit fine," admitted Craven, "but he'll pass us astern clear enough. I don't mind. I'd like to catch a glimpse of his face to see whether anything's scared him. Lord! for a boat like that, he's travelling; but we'll be across the line of his wash and ride it all right."

The launch had very little more than steerage-way on her, for Craven had throttled down twice, the more easily to talk to Enid, and so the speed of the *Corsair* was very apparent. She was not a big craft, certainly not more than forty feet, but she was magnificently designed, and fitted with Diesel engines of lavish power. She bore down on them, tearing through the water at about sixteen and a half knots—a high speed for a cabin cruiser—and two smooth arcs of green water sprang away from under her lifted, planing bows. With her polished mahogany superstructure and gleaming cream sides she looked beautiful—she had that appearance of life that all true seacraft wear. Slanting on to the launch's course at an angle of about forty-five degrees, she would pass them astern some twenty yards away.

Craven had the eyes of a prairie Indian, and when the *Corsair* was still forty yards away, he distinguished Blantyre's scowling face glowering alone at the wheel of the speeding boat. Blantyre was gazing at him so intently that Craven felt that he had been recognized in turn—no difficult or uncertain feat, for his head of white hair and the build of his head and shoulders were exceptionally striking. He chuckled with mildly malicious glee. How pleased, he reflected, Blantyre must be to see him. Derisively he waved his arm about his head in greeting and made a mock salute.

It was a very foolish gesture, had he but known, for Blantyre, goaded by losses, apprehension and rage, not to mention a liberal priming of whisky, was like a bull ready to charge. The sight of Craven, calm, contemptuous and insolent, made him see red. For a moment his hands abandoned the wheel and he shook

both fists at Craven, while his lips bared his teeth in fury. Seizing the wheel again he swung it in insensate rage and drove the straining *Corsair* headlong upon the smaller launch.

The *Corsair* had a small keel and, swiftly banking, she spun round with such suddenness that Blantyre's purpose was apparent in a flash to Craven. He sprang to the controls of the launch, flung the throttle wide and spun the wheel in the endeavour to swing his stern out of the way of the charging steel prow that leaped towards him. The launch shot forward, but in the time available it was impossible for her to gather speed for quick manœuvring, and her acceleration merely served to rob the overtaking impact of some of its force. She was only a wooden craft, and the sharp bow of the *Corsair*, biting into her starboard quarter well aft, cut forward into her hull and wrecked the wheel-house. Enid was flung on to Craven, and both were momentarily stupefied by the shock. Fortunately all the window-glass was Triplex, or they would have been badly cut; as it was, they escaped any actual injury whatsoever.

Craven was himself again in a second or so, and realized that his boat would keep above water only as long as the bows of the *Corsair* remained wedged into her hull. Seizing Enid, he heaved her through the sunshine roof on to what remained of the sliding hatch and levered himself up beside her. As she was still dazed, he picked her up and pitched her bodily on to the forecastle deck of the *Corsair* and followed her in a swift leap, just as the boats fell away from one another. With a rushing gurgle of water the launch immediately filled and sank.

In avoiding Enid, Craven slipped and fell on to his hands and knees, in which position he was startled by the crash of a revolver shot that went wide over his head, and, looking up, saw one of Blantyre's men struggling madly with his employer for the possession of the smoking weapon. Clearly the man had inter-

vened in their favour. He was a burly fellow and desperate; he wrenched the revolver out of Blantyre's grasp and sent him reeling against the wheel-house.

"You're mad, Governor," he panted. "D'ye want to hang us both?"

Craven stepped forward; but the man turned in a flash.

"Hands up," he snapped. "And stay where you are."

Craven hesitated and immediately a bullet whizzed by within a foot of his head. He complied with the order.

"Shoot 'em both, Clayte," screeched Blantyre. "Shoot 'em and pitch 'em overboard."

"Shut up!" shouted the man. "You'll thank me for this when you've got your senses back," and he waved the revolver towards Blantyre with a determined gesture that left no doubt he intended to remain master of the situation. His eyes flashed back to the two refugees on the forecastle hatch. "Pick the young lady up, Mr. Craven," he ordered curtly, "and bring her aft."

Craven could always recognize a man. In personality Clayte was worth ten of his employer, and there was no boggling possible in face of his fierce resoluteness. Craven did as he was ordered, for he realized that, while Clayte was averse to murder, if he were hard pressed he would shoot without the slightest hesitation. Overlooked by Clayte's grim eyes and the menacing muzzle of the revolver, he was shepherded with Enid into the small after cabin in which Mabel Renshaw had been held prisoner.

"Keep quiet and realize when you're well off," said Clayte, and locked the door on them.

"I'll be damned," said Craven with a laugh, and dropped on to one of the two low berths that the cabin contained.

There was to him something supremely ludicrous in the suddenness and speed with which ill adventure

had overwhelmed them. From the time he had first sighted the *Corsair* till they were locked in her after cabin could not have been more than eight minutes.

The engines burst into life, smoothly built up their revolutions, and the *Corsair* was once more cutting swiftly through the calm water, which chuckled, rushed and gurgled along the finely moulded lines of her vibrating hull.

"I think," said Enid, sitting on the other berth opposite to Craven, "that I might just as well have been run in by the police."

There was nothing in the cabin except the fittings and the folded blankets on the berths. They gazed through the port-lights—too small to offer any prospect of escape—and saw only the sea, already darkening to a deep blue-grey except where its surface caught the level rays of the setting sun and mirrored them as dazzling patches of light. On neither quarter was there any sign of land, nor within the limited sweep of their vision was there a single ship.

They sat on the berths and discussed the situation. It was all very inconclusive and nothing stood out clearly except that Clayte could apparently be relied upon to prevent Blantyre murdering them, and in that case they would ultimately be dumped ashore in some lonely spot where they would be unable for a considerable time to take effective measures against their assailants. The inactivity was very wearisome, and as the light died away, Craven, after discovering the electric light was switched off, persuaded Enid to lie down and try to sleep, as the only thing either worth doing or possible. She agreed in dubious tone, and to encourage her in the effort he stretched himself on the other berth. The rhythmical heave of the boat over the long swell had a lulling effect, and the monotonous vibration of the engines also was conducive to sleep. Enid's quiet breathing soon told Craven that, despite her expectations to the contrary, she had gone to sleep. He, too, felt sleepy, and in that

state contemplated the situation with no more than idle ironical amusement. "Our second night together," he thought, and with that drifted into sleep himself.

How long he had slept he did not know, but he woke with such sudden completeness that he wondered what had awakened him. The cabin was in complete darkness, though the port-lights showed up as circles of dull grey. He strained his ears, but there was not a sound to be heard except the dull slap of the water under the boat's counter as she wallowed on the swell. Then he realized what had awakened him: the engines had stopped.

"Now what's afoot?" he asked himself. Listening intently, he heard a dull scuffling forward, then for what seemed a considerable time there was silence. Finally there came the sound of footsteps and someone tramped heavily aft and approached the cabin. There was a sharp, thudding knock at the door.

"Hallo!" said a gruff voice. It was Clayte.

"Hallo!" replied Craven tersely.

Enid woke with a startled gasp and listened.

"I want to talk with you," explained Clayte. "I've got my revolver handy, but it will save time and trouble if you promise not to try to rush me till the talk's over. Your word's good enough."

"Very well," agreed Craven, "I promise, till the talk's over."

Thereupon Clayte opened the door and sat down on the top step of the three that led down into the cabin. They could see his burly figure in silhouette against the faint grey light that filled the wheel-house.

"You and I had better come to terms, Mr. Craven," he began bluntly. "The Governor's drunk himself silly. Been mopping whisky all the time he was at the wheel. How much he's got through, God only knows. I found him half daft ten minutes ago. That's why I stopped the boat."

"Someone will pick us up," replied Craven casually. "There's plenty of traffic in the Channel and we shan't

come to any harm in this settled weather. Just drift round for a while."

"We're not going to drift round," broke in Clayte with grim determination. "The Governor was making for St. Malo, and he must have got us somewhere near the Channel Islands by now. There's a light blinking away on the skyline, but I don't know what it is. All the same, I'll blind on and find out, and then drive through the islands, bad place as they are for ships. Sink or swim, I'll go on if you won't help, and you and the lady will swim or sink too, just as the chance comes. The Governor's been a good boss to me, and I'll see him through."

"Damn Blantyre! " retorted Craven. "I suppose you're not by any chance trying to save your own skin? "

"That I am," admitted Clayte, who was too downright a character to dabble with pretence. "Unless the Governor makes a good get-away and me with him, I'm on my uppers. But don't think I'm squealing or afraid. I know what I'm up against and don't mind admitting it, that's all. Go on I will, but I thought you would have the sense to see that, if you took over the navigation, not only us, but you and the young lady'd be safe."

"Safe where? " temporized Craven, who had sensed the man's drift from the beginning, but had deliberately been slow to accept the overture.

"Any place within reason," replied Clayte eagerly. "You'd have to pass your word not to put the police on my track, and, so that they can't get hold of you quickly and put two and two together with your help, you'll have to be content with an out-of-the-way place—say, Sark. Nobody would worry about you on Sark for days."

"I've only your word that, if I put you on your course, you'd keep your bargain," objected Craven.

"See here, mister," burst in Clayte indignantly, "I've never met you till to-day, but I sized you up straightway and knew I could take your word. I'm doing it now. My revolver's in my pocket," and he held

his hands up so that his fingers showed in silhouette either side of his head. "You ought to be able to reckon me up in the same way as one whose word's good."

There was a certain rough dignity about the man that, together with his directness, impressed Craven. He said nothing for a moment, and the other waited in dogged silence.

The conflict of Craven's feelings amounted to a dilemma. He had taken a quick liking to this forthright henchman of Blantyre's, but Blantyre himself he could not stomach, and, as this last bout had so far gone against him, he was less inclined than ever to call the quarrel off. On the other hand, by keeping the fight going, he might be exposing Enid to grave dangers.

She sensed his quandary before he could decide.

"Don't worry about me," she told him. "This man is bluffing. All this talk of his about blinding through the islands is humbug. He's not the type. He's too steady to smash things up. He's the sort that gets there. You do what you think fit."

Clayte gave a throaty grunt of disgust; he was not used to compliments, and this particular one threatened to upset his immediate plans.

His annoyance was justified, for Enid's remark turned the scales.

"Sorry, Clayte," said Craven tersely; "nothing doing. I'd call the row off with you, but not with Blantyre. We'll see it through."

Clayte immediately recognized this as final. He rose to his feet and scrambled heavily out of the cabin.

"Very well, Mr. Craven, we'll play the game out. But on your head be it. Don't blame me." He locked the door upon them and tramped back to the wheelhouse.

His return seemed to give especial satisfaction to Blantyre, whose greeting was so hilarious that it reached to the after cabin. By the time Clayte had got the boat running again, a stentorian rendering of "Down at the

Old Bull and Bush" penetrated to every corner of the craft, and doubtless extended over the sea to make the night hideous. Left to himself, Blantyre had evidently carried his drunkenness to the vocal stage.

"Clayte looks like having his hands full," remarked Craven. "He ought to have locked him up."

Blantyre finished his piece and went on to "My Little Grey Home in the West," which in turn was succeeded by "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

As it was quite impossible to sleep—and for that matter he no longer felt like it—Craven proceeded to an aimless examination of the dark cabin, while Enid gazed through the port-lights. The doors, as he had realized from the start, could be burst open with comparative ease. He had, however, not the slightest intention of making this dramatic exit, for he was perfectly sure that, on hearing the noise, Clayte would walk aft and drop him with a neatly directed shot. He continued his round of the cabin, fumbling high and low in the darkness and poking into every corner.

Enid dolefully rubbed her port-light in the hope of removing condensed moisture and so gaining a view. She could still see nothing.

The chariot not having swung low at his call, Blantyre passed on to "Clementine."

"What's this?" muttered Craven at last, when he touched something under the berth on the port side and found it was moving. For a moment he was puzzled.

"There are lights out here," called Enid excitedly. "They've just come into view. We're overhauling a ship quite close."

"Just a second," said Craven, plucking at the object that moved beneath his fingers. "Oh, of course," he cried, somewhat impatiently, "it's part of the steering-gear. The wire ropes that connect the wheel and the rudder run along either side. They're left unenclosed so that they can be got at quickly." He had risen as he spoke and now peered through the port-light.

"By gad! Yes! They are close," he agreed. "Looks like a tug towing a barge or a hulk."

At that moment Blantyre began "Onward, Christian Soldiers," suitably transposed to a lower key so that he could get his teeth into it.

"Oh, that fool!" growled Craven. "I wish I was near him. I wonder Clayte doesn't down him for fear he should attract attention."

"Couldn't we do something to attract attention?" asked Enid, eagerly catching at the idea.

"No," said Craven. "There's nothing we . . . Yes, there is! I've got it!" he cried, and, dropping on to the floor, fumbled wildly for the wire rudder-rope on the port side. Just as his fingers closed on it, an uproar in the wheel-house suggested that the long patience of Clayte had at last broken down, or that, as a precautionary measure, he had decided to silence his employer. Craven gave a steady but strenuous heave, and the way in which the wire yielded made it clear that at the moment Clayte had left the wheel unattended, presumably to deal with Blantyre. The rudder went over hard to port, the speeding launch banked with a sickening lurch, and everything seemed to heel over. Craven held on desperately, knowing that only very spectacular effects would be of any value to make the boat conspicuous.

To his ears there came first a crash as of human bodies falling against woodwork, then a violent bang that suggested a door being burst open and flung back upon its hinges, and immediately upon this a wild scream and a deep-throated shout which seemed to reach them from outside the boat. Finally, there was complete silence.

Craven was aghast. "They've lurched through the wheel-house door and gone overboard!" he shouted in a voice made strident by horror.

Springing to his feet, he madly charged the locked doors and went through them with a crash that landed him in a heap in the small cockpit aft. Enid followed

him so quickly that she collided with him as he was regaining his feet. Clutching one another to recover their balance, they gazed wildly forward. One glance showed them that the wheel-house was empty, unless Clayte and Blantyre were grovelling on the floor. The wheel certainly was unattended.

Craven was just leaping forward to investigate when a hoarse, half-smothered cry pulled him up. It came from astern. Leaning over the transom, he could at first see nothing except the seething, phosphorescent wake, but, as his eyes adjusted themselves to the vague light, he made out a human form clinging desperately to a trailing mooring-line that had evidently been overlooked in the launch's hurried departure. It was Clayte, alive, but in a desperate plight. Clearly he had the utmost difficulty in clinging to the thin rope and keeping his head above water sufficiently to breathe. Before Craven could do anything, the man gave another hoarse cry, lost his grip of the rope, and sank in a fashion that offered small hope of his coming to the surface and keeping himself afloat for long.

Quick as thought, Craven grabbed the life-belt with its automatic flare that was fixed on the end of the cabin, and flung it towards the spot where Clayte had disappeared. As he did so, he realized that there was precious little chance of Clayte being able to reach it. Without hesitation, he sprang on to the broad transom.

"Bring the boat round, Enid, and stop her! " he shouted, and dived clear of the boiling water thrown up by the propellors, into the line of the wake.

The flare of the life-belt was already forty yards away, and to Enid, as she spun round to obey Craven's instructions, it seemed like her last hope being whirled away into outer darkness. Terror-stricken, she recklessly rushed along the narrow side deck on the port side and reached the wheel-house. Besides her sickening dread that Craven would be lost, she was harried by the fear that she would not be able to understand the

controls and manœuvre the *Corsair*. She kept her head, however. A swift glance at the controls somewhat reassured her, for they resembled in their lay-out those of Craven's ill-fated craft. By the wheel was what appeared to be the throttle, and, as she swung the rudder hard over, she tentatively moved this lever. The engines immediately slowed. That was enough for her; she now felt she could manage.

As the boat came round, she took in her surroundings and situation. The darkness was not as dense as it had appeared to be when she was in the cabin; dawn was apparently approaching. The flare of the life-belt was clearly visible to port about half a mile away, and somewhat nearer were the lights of the two ships they had passed. This position rather puzzled her until she realized that the helm of the launch had never properly eased off after Craven's violent interference with its steering, and so the boat had been running on a course that curved away to port and would eventually have become a circle. As she reached this conclusion, she also discovered that the *Corsair* was now steering in somewhat cranky fashion. There was a great deal of back lash in the gear, and clearly this slackness was due to something having been badly strained by Craven's wrench at the rudder. Still, the boat was fairly manageable, for after a few wild yaws Enid got her on a course which bore down upon the light that meant so much to her, and the two men struggling for their lives in the water. She made all possible speed, and the *Corsair* ripped through the water. The run back was only a matter of three minutes. She held on at full speed till she was about forty yards distant from the flare, and then put the engines to slow. The bows dropped, the boat rapidly lost speed, and, at ten yards' distance from the light, was only doing a couple of knots. The light was so bright that she could not see the life-belt itself, which lay beyond it. She circled slowly round, feeling sick with suspense. Would the life-belt be empty? Round still farther she went, and then her heart gave

a leap. Craven was there, clinging to the life-belt and holding Clayte's chin up against it to keep his head above water. She put the main engine control lever in neutral, the screws stopped and the launch slid to a standstill alongside the pair, so exactly that the life-belt bobbed and rubbed along the boat's side. Enid felt she had been very lucky.

The *Corsair* was provided with a side ladder for the use of anyone bathing from her. She slung it over the side and Craven grasped it.

"Can you lean down over the side and grab his arm, Enid? He's swallowed so much water he's just about all in; he'll never get up by himself."

Enid got a firm grip of the rail with one hand and bent down towards them. Craven jerked one of Clayte's arms towards her and she caught it round the wrist.

"Hang on tight," said Craven. "I'll be with you in a second."

While she supported the half-conscious man, Craven scrambled up the ladder and, once on board himself, hauled Clayte into safety with a heave that landed him sprawling on the narrow deck. Clayte rolled over with a bubbling, sobbing noise and was violently sick.

"He'll be all right," announced Craven brusquely. "Now to look for Blantyre; but I'm afraid there's not much hope for him."

As Craven got the *Corsair* under way, he noticed the lights of the tug and her charge about a quarter of a mile away, and it occurred to him that his best chance of finding Blantyre was to steer close past them, parallel with their course, and then begin the search, for the *Corsair* was probably just drawing ahead of them when Blantyre and Clayte went overboard. This he proceeded to do. On drawing level with the two ships, he discovered, however, that they had stopped, and that an unusual state of commotion seemed to prevail aboard. He edged in close to the tug, which was almost touching the larger vessel. Nobody was on the look-

out on his side, so Craven thrust his head through the wheel-house window.

"Ship ahoy!" he hailed.

This brought an excited Frenchman to the end of the tug's bridge.

"Ah!" he cried. "It ees you, come back. You look for ze . . . ze . . . lost man. Well, you come catch eem. 'E is . . . what you say . . . a lunatique. 'E run all over ze sheep and nobody know how to catch eem."

The man waved his hand towards the other vessel, and Craven became aware that a sort of maritime steeplechase was in progress. He switched on the *Corsair's* searchlight and trained it on the scene. A wild figure, which with difficulty he recognized as Blantyre, was stampeding round the ship pursued by four excited French sailors. He dodged and clambered about the superstructure with amazing agility and, when pressed into a corner, turned upon his pursuers and pelted them with odd lumps of coal, pieces of coke and any other oddments that came to hand. Several of the missiles got home. Craven hoped that Enid did not know enough French to understand what the sailors said.

Suddenly he read the ship's name and started.

"God bless me!" he cried. "It's our old German tramp steamer. I heard that a French johnny at Brest had bought her for an old song. But this is bedlam. Hi! Captain," he shouted, "whatever did you put him aboard there for?"

The question was tactless.

"*Nom de Dieu!*" exploded the Frenchman. "I put eem there, you zay. He com 'imself. Sometink happen on your little sheep, I see and turn my sheeps zat way and zen stop. Dis lunatique 'e float by holding a small . . . a small . . . barrel."

"Empty oil-drum," explained Clayte, who had found his feet. "There was one there; we must have knocked it overboard."

Craven nodded.

"'E float bump against ze old Bosch sheep," went on the Captain. Craven could see his bristling moustaches and waving fists. "'E climb up a ladder we 'ave left, *et voilà.*" He spread out his hands in a dramatic gesture of enraged disgust. "You come catch eem," he demanded again with peremptory finality.

"He's all right," shouted Craven. "He's only drunk and a bit upset by falling overboard. Leave him alone. He's been on that ship before and feels at home; he likes it."

How the agitated son of France would have taken these remarks will never be known, for at that point a three-inch steel nut, hurled by Blantyre with more than ordinary energy, hit him on the collar-bone.

"*Mille tonnerres!*" he screeched. "*Moi, je vais arracher . . .*"

Enid stopped her ears and Craven decided she must know a lot of French.

"Well, I don't see what good we're doing here," ejaculated Craven, when they had listened to the hubbub for several minutes more. "Personally, I could do with a change of dry clothes. What do you say, Clayte?"

"If I was you, sir," advised that lugubrious individual, "I should beat it. The Guv'nor's gone off his blooming head, as I always said he would. The only thing to do is to leave him. I've had enough, and anyway, I'm nothing to him without the *Corsair.* He'll come round when he's exhausted, and I expect Brest will be as good to him as St. Malo."

"So be it," said Craven. "Away we go. I think this boat is a fair swop for that one of mine he sunk. We'll call it quits."

"But is it fair to the Frenchman to leave him with Blantyre on his hands?" expostulated Enid.

"Fair? Yes," scoffed Craven. "Blantyre is sure to have plenty of money on him, and our friend Jacques will make him stump up handsomely. Besides, this

experience will fortify him in that peculiarly French conviction that all the English are mad. In the long run Blantyre will be a comfort to him. Give them three days and everything will be arranged, everything forgiven. They will sit in an *estaminet* at Brest like brothers, *le bon capitaine* flicking the froth off his whiskers while Blantyre pays for the beers.

"At times you are positively disgusting," said Enid, but her remark was largely lost in the noise of Craven's setting the engines running.

At their departure the Frenchman shrieked loudly to heaven—perfidious Albion had again outraged the finer feelings of her neighbours.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

LANDFALL

CRAVEN awoke at eleven o'clock on the Sunday morning. He stretched himself as he lay on the long cushion he had borrowed from the saloon, gave a mild yawn and then sat up in the wheel-house. After a moment he got to his feet and gazed through the windows.

The *Corsair* lay peacefully at anchor, almost aground in a bay of wondrously blue water that was dazzlingly bright in the sunlight. A ribbon of white sand fringed the shore; behind, rugged broken cliffs ran up into the interior of the land, in the folds of which was a wealth of trees. He leaned out of the wheel-house door and listened. Enid made no stir in the after cabin; evidently she still slept on. Behind him there sounded a discreet cough and, turning, he saw the imperturbable face of Clayte, who was standing just within the saloon.

"Good morning, sir. Would you like some coffee?"

"Good morning," replied Craven. "Thanks, I would."

The man turned and went forward to the galley. As Craven waited there reached him the faint but unmistakable odour of ham and eggs. It made him feel hungry.

Clayte handed him the coffee. "Would you like a bath, sir, or do you prefer breakfast straightway? I saw you were beginning to stir and put ham and eggs on the stove ten minutes ago."

Craven sighed with pleasurable anticipation. "Ham and eggs, please. The bath can wait, as I had one only a few hours ago. By the bye, are you feeling all right?"

"Yes, sir, and thanks very much for what you did for me last night," replied Clayte earnestly.

"Oh, that's nothing," protested Craven, who was always embarrassed by thanks.

"Beg pardon, sir, but it meant rather a lot to me," said the man.

Without another word he turned and began bringing an excellent breakfast into the saloon. Craven had barely time to plunge his face into cold water and dry before all was ready.

He ate in thoughtful silence. When he had finished he called Clayte.

"Any cigarettes about?" he asked.

Clayte produced a box of State Express from a cupboard. Craven took one.

"Thanks. Help yourself," he said, "and sit down, I want to talk to you."

Clayte did so, and in stiff, clumsy embarrassment sat and smoked, waiting for what Craven had to say.

"I see you've been busy while I had my sleep out," he remarked. "Decks swabbed down, saloon tidied and aired—it smelt like a stale tap-room when I put my head into it last night—breakfast cooked to a nicety, ready for when I wanted it. Why didn't you scoot instead of doing all this?"

Clayte fidgeted. "Didn't know where I was," he said gruffly. "Never seen this bay before."

"Dixcart Bay, Sark," Craven told him. "That light you spotted before the final hullabaloo last night turned out to be Quenard Point, Alderney. I prefer Sark and know my way round it, so I ran down through The Race while you slept—er—like an innocent child."

Clayte gave a faint smile—evidently ironical humour was not lost on him—but said nothing.

"However," went on Craven smoothly, "the fact that you do not know Sark doesn't at all explain to me why you did not clear out. Didn't it occur to you that I might hand you over to the police?"

Clayte plucked up courage. "It didn't," he said

bluntly, "and what's more, I don't think it's occurred to you, sir, except casually this very minute. You're not the sort of gentleman who calls in the police to finish off a row for him."

"Humph!" grunted Craven in non-committal tone.

"The fact is," continued Clayte hurriedly, "last night I was not only just about all in, but also absolutely fed up with the Governor for being such a fool as to muff everything. I couldn't help him any more—without this boat I was no good to him—and when I realized how you had pulled me out of the sea, well, I suddenly felt inclined to stay where I was. And I woke up this morning feeling just the same."

Craven played for time while he thought out the implications of this unexpected avowal.

"You say you were fed up with Blantyre?"

"I should just think I was," Clayte explained indignantly. "First he lost his head over the police message that they broadcast for Miss Petersham. Completely rattled he was. 'Clayte,' he says to me, 'the police never come into the open suddenly like that until they're ready to pounce. The net's spread wide, and it's going to close. I'm off.' And off he was; nothing I could say would make him think twice. Then he lit himself up with whisky and had two shots at putting you out. That was asking for a halter for both of us. He went on the booze till he couldn't keep the boat straight on her course—that was when I tried to make an arrangement with you. Next, he nearly yowled my head off with his singing and, just as I was grabbing at him to put him on the floor for safety, he lost his legs, owing to you heeling the boat over, and knocked me through the wheel-house door into the sea. Then look at him on that blooming hooker, like a lunatic, as that Froggie said. You can't do anything for a man like that."

Craven smiled quietly, remembering the French captain, and reflectively lit another cigarette from the stub of the first one. Silence fell.

"What have the police got on you?" he demanded with sudden bluntness.

"Nothing except the lifting of that report from Mr. Coddington's place, and I don't know that they've exactly got that tabbed down against me."

"No," agreed Craven, "perhaps not. In any case, only Miss Renshaw's evidence could pull you in, and she's getting married next Wednesday and going to Africa. Are you sure there's nothing else in your adventurous past? You don't strike me as the sort of chap who works off his surplus energy by running a Sunday school."

"No," admitted Clayte, "but the only other thing that they have against me I did time for. Pinched a banker's family jewellery six years ago."

"Public opinion nowadays," observed Craven, "hardly regards that as a crime. Did they recover the jewellery?"

"No," said Clayte.

"Ah, well! Then you've nothing to regret," said Craven. He continued to smoke in silence for a few minutes and then, "Are you married?" he asked.

"No, sir. No responsibilities at all except what I carry under my hat."

"Some people might think that enough," came the dry comment. "Well, I've no immediate use for your professional abilities, but I'll pay you £3 10s. a week, starting from yesterday, to look after this boat for the time being. You'd better lead a quiet life for a spell, and not make yourself conspicuous. And now," he said, after a faint pause, "while you are laying the table again I will go to see if Miss Petersham is still in the after cabin."

"Thank you, sir," said Clayte, and hurried away to the galley.

Craven got up slowly, carefully dusted some cigarette ash off his grey flannel trousers—quite a good pair, that must have cost Blantyre three guineas at least—and made his way aft.

The broken doors of the cabin were slightly ajar and, as he listened, he thought for the moment that Enid was still asleep. But presently there came the rustle of bed-clothes made when one rolls over, and then a quiet sigh—that blissful acknowledgment of a glorious sleep. He tapped at the door.

"Aren't you going to get up, young lady? It's nearly lunch-time."

"Oh, really," came the reply, in clear, laughing tone. "Is that you, Mr. Craven?"

"No," he said, "it is not. It's me. Push your head in a bowl of cold water and come and have some food, or you'll collapse upon your backbone like a shut-up umbrella."

"Give me five minutes," she asked, "and I'll be with you."

"I'll tell Clayte ten," he decided sceptically.

"He's still here, then?" she remarked in some surprise.

"Yes. He's developed a strange disinclination to clear out, so I'm letting him stop. Be an angel and hurry up. It's glorious out here, and only one thing spoils the picture."

"What's that?"

"You're not in it."

"Go and push your head in a bowl of cold water," she told him.

Craven departed with a grin.

When Enid came on deck, the glory of Sark pulled her up short and held her enthralled. That first glance suggested the place was an earthly paradise.

"Is it all as wonderful as this?" she asked.

"Every bit of it," he declared, and then in a whisper, "I told you I would think of something gorgeous for our honeymoon."

To her own annoyance and his surprise, she blushed furiously, and her eyes fell before his. Craven felt that in his morning hilarity he had made a *faux pas*, and certainly, while Enid breakfasted, they both seemed

glad that the presence of Clayte prevented anything but the most ordinary conversation. Craven sat on the floor of the wheel-house at the top of the saloon steps with his knees pulled up to his chin, and expatiated upon the beauties of Sark. She was politely interested; but he suspected, and rightly, that half her attention was engrossed by their situation and mutual relations.

When she had finished eating, he still clung to the topic of Sark.

"Let's go ashore to stretch our legs," he suggested, "and I'll show you something of the place."

She agreed.

The ebb-tide had now run still farther, so that the *Corsair* was aground on firm, yellow sand, and at the foot of her boarding-ladder there was only a few inches of water. Carrying their footgear, they waded ashore and walked up the beach.

They had landed just west of that natural arch so beloved of the photographer, and inevitably it drew their aimless feet that way. They walked through it, out of warm sunshine into cool gloom, and then into the bright day again. They thus came to the rocky path that climbs from the shore and, following it, entered the wooded glen which leads up into the luxuriance of Dixcart Valley. They walked along in silence. A sea of summer foliage was around them, and at their feet a carpet of fern. The scent of the fertile mould greeted them at every step. Down the glen tumbled a small stream, which in places leaped from the rocks in delicate, miniature waterfalls. Its spray clung to the fronds and grasses, and to the gossamer webs of insects, in points and chains of moisture that gleamed in the sunlight like minutest jewellery. Except for the plash of the water, the song and flutter of the birds, not a sound stirred in the morning air.

For a long time they sat on the moss-covered trunk of a fallen tree and revelled in the scene. The place

was so beautiful that all words seemed idle and foolish to describe it. They enjoyed it in silence.

"Where does this path lead to?" asked Enid at length.

"Up to the hotels—'Stock's' and 'The Dixcart'—and then on to what few houses there are scattered about. Shall we go on?"

"No," she said. "I don't feel like people."

"There won't be many," he told her, "and they will all be having lunch. Day-trippers don't land on Sundays."

"I don't feel like people at all," she insisted.

"Very well," he acquiesced. "We'll go back along the shore; there wasn't a soul to be seen in the whole bay."

They retraced their steps and then tramped westward under the cliffs for nearly half a mile, still without finding much to say, until the beach ended in a high jumble of rocks beyond which lay a perfect natural bathing-pool, not completely cut off from the sea, but sheltered, and beautiful with green water and shining sand. They sat down above it on the rocks.

"What a place for a bathe!" sighed Craven. "It makes me want to go in; but I haven't any things."

"You could get down there among the rocks," Enid pointed out in the blunt, practical way of the modern girl. "There's nobody about, and if there were they couldn't see you. The sun will dry you in three minutes when you've finished."

Craven laughed. "Perhaps I will. But not for the moment," he went on, somewhat nervously. "I want to talk to you.

"I'm sorry I jarred on you before breakfast," he said, plunging straight to the point. "My remark about bringing you here for your honeymoon was tactless, to say the least. I didn't really mean it; I was joking. In a way, though, I'm glad I said it, for the fact that it startled you pulled me up. It isn't really my aim to exploit the situation and rush through to a

conclusion. I almost did it once before; but Phyllis turned up to stop me. That I now see was great good luck."

He rolled over as he spoke, so that he was lying full length, slightly propped up on his elbows. In that position neither could see the other's face. She, at any rate, was glad of this, and glad, too, that apparently he did not expect her to do anything except listen.

"This is how I see it, Enid," he continued. "You and I have been thrown together by chance, and have had a most exciting time, rushing up hill and down dale, as it were, in one another's company. Now, at the end of it all, we are fond of one another and come to the last irrevocable leap. Shall we make it? I'm willing enough, for God knows I want you, my dear. But it wouldn't be fair not to stop to ask you. Besides, I wouldn't like to capture you, you dear thing, even at the height of my wildest desire, for you mean more to me than that. You must come deliberately. I'll take you up to 'Stock's Hotel,' or to Guernsey, or back to England to be married, just whatever you like. The immediate arrangement doesn't matter at all. What does matter is that you should be perfectly sure of yourself.

"Do think it over," he implored, as she still said nothing. "Please take me seriously, forget all my madcap posturings and headlong ways. Look here, my dear——"

She made a half-articulate sound as though she were at last finding her tongue.

"No, don't say anything now. Look here——" and he tugged from off his finger the quaint ring of Tibetan gold that he had always worn as long as she had known him. Her hands were clenched tightly. He opened one and laid the ring on her palm.

"I don't want you to answer now; but all that a ring can mean from a man to a woman I offer you." He closed her fingers down over it. "Be quite sure

of yourself," he said. "And now," he added with a nervous laugh, as he suddenly sprang to his feet, "I'm off to have that plunge, if I may. My nerves are all strung up taut; I'll do something silly in a minute."

With a slight wave of her hand she motioned him to go, and he hurried swiftly away among the rocks.

Mechanically, she watched him till he disappeared behind a large rock at the edge of the pool below her, some thirty yards distant. She then realized she was in such a tumult of feeling that she might have been seated on something that swayed giddily instead of on immovable stone. Gradually her agitation lessened and, feeling the ring clenched so hard in her hand that it almost hurt, she opened her fingers and looked at it—the symbol of all that a man can offer a woman.

What a quixotically chivalrous creature he was, she reflected. Not that she was surprised at his deliberate, almost exasperating, punctiliousness. It was quite what she had always expected of him. Indeed, his tactless jesting about the honeymoon had mainly startled her because she had been wondering how he would deal with their romantically unconventional situation, so as to avoid the slightest suggestion of jockeying her into an acceptance of him. Well, this was how he had ultimately faced the situation. Here was his ring. She turned it over and over in her palm, and the gold facets gleamed in the sun. Characteristically he had not pushed it on to her finger, but laid it in her hand. She had to be perfectly sure that she wanted it, and all that it implied. She had to think things over.

She lifted her head with a smile at the thought of how needless it was for her to do any further thinking. Still, he required to be assured.

As she looked up, she caught a glimpse of his head and shoulders over the rocks as he walked to the edge of the pool. On the brink he paused a moment, and, having poised himself for a dive, flashed out of sight.

A few minutes later, he appeared clear of the pool, swimming leisurely in the long, slow swell that crept round into the bay from the Atlantic.

She wondered what the dear, dear idiot's thoughts were at that precise moment. Did he imagine she could sit there and work it all out like a sum, as though she were casting up her ready cash to determine whether her decision to buy six new pairs of silk stockings really was sound or not? One did not decide in that fashion to get married, one—oh, well, one just decided, and that was all. She would have to tell him so and hope that the mere weight of the bald statement would convince him.

By this time her thoughts had lost their intensity, and her attention had been partially occupied in watching Craven, who, having given several excellent imitations of a porpoise rolling and diving, was now placidly floating on the swell. Evidently he finally fancied himself in the rôle of a basking shark. It suddenly struck Enid that conditions for a swim were absolutely perfect, and that Craven must be enjoying himself hugely, all his preoccupations washed away.

"While I sit stewing here," she added, with a faint feeling of amused annoyance, "to make perfectly sure and be able to tell him so."

Craven, she decided, would have to be jolted into a state of assured conviction. At this a sudden thought struck her. She smiled, but immediately became grave again. "After all, why not?" she murmured to herself, as her eyes roved over the empty bay and deserted shore. Still, she was not absolutely decided, and it was at a slow pace that she followed in Craven's steps along the faint track that led down among the rocks to the pool. Her fingers, too, toyed nervously with the gold ring that she still carried in her hand.

Rounding a corner, she came to where Craven's clothes lay in a heap, and from there she saw him clearly, fifty yards away, lazily swimming shorewards on his back, and obviously revelling in the caressing fresh-

ness of the sea. Instantly her decision was made. Craven should have his answer.

She pushed the ring on to the third finger of her left hand and, bending down, began swiftly to unlace her shoes, with fingers that trembled slightly but never hesitated.

Craven did not remember ever enjoying a swim more. At one and the same time he was refreshed and tranquillized. As he lay floating on his back, he felt that he would be quite content to let the slowly heaving water first lull him to sleep, and then drift him away whither it would. With a twinge of conscience, however, he remembered Enid and reflected that his agitated proposal of marriage had probably proved about as restful to her as an exploding bomb. He had not been very considerate, he feared, and that, on top of his lack of tact earlier in the day, had perhaps made matters worse instead of mending them. Deciding that he had better return, he slowly struck out shorewards without turning over.

An occasional quick twist of his head gave him a glimpse of the shore sufficient to keep him on his course. The high pile of rocks above the bathing-pool was unmistakable, and he veered slightly to the left to strike the pool. Continuing to think of Enid, he unconsciously quickened his pace, though he still swam on his back. Another swift glance assured him that he was striking fairly into the entrance of the pool, from which it was a straight swim of about forty yards to the foot of the tall rock from which he had dived. Not until he was almost there did he turn over, to find that he had judged the distance very closely—ten yards away was the rock. Flat-topped and sheer, it leaned forward over the green water of the pool as though, some day, it would topple and fall prone upon the sand at its feet. There was an easy landing-place, he saw, to the left, where a tongue of sand led away up among the rocks. He swam towards it.

Suddenly, above, just on the fringe of the pictur-

that he saw, something moved, and Craven's eyes whipped upwards to the flat crown of the rock pedestal.

It was Enid.

The sight of her pulled him up with a breast-stroke but half-completed. Slim and gleaming, she looked like a sea-nymph, and he caught his breath at the wonder of her beauty. She looked down at him gravely, and in her dark eyes was neither smile nor flicker of embarrassment.

Unconsciously he dropped his feet on to the sandy bottom and stood breast deep in the water, watching her.

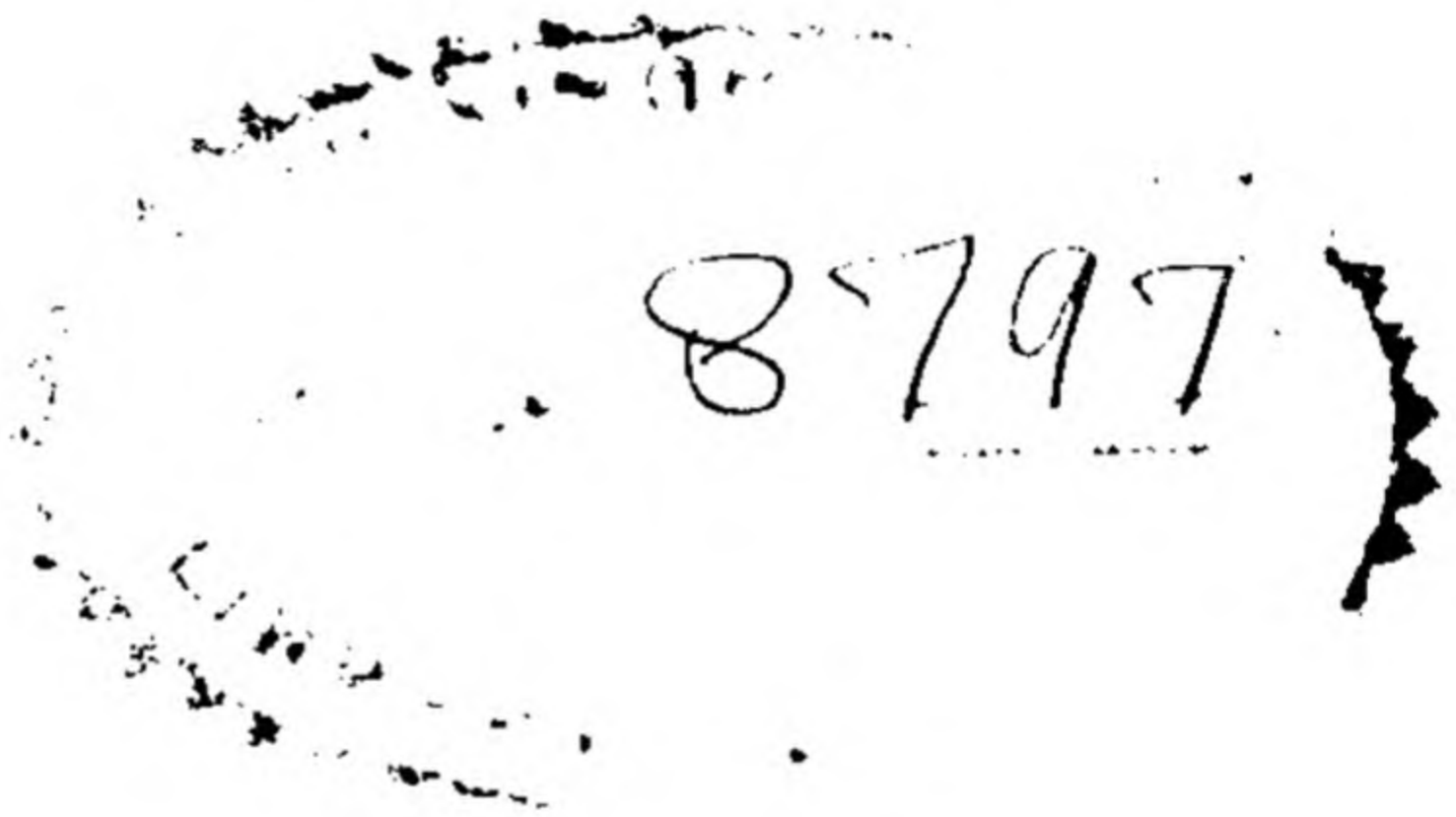
Very deliberately she poised herself on the rock, her hands rose slowly above her head, and he saw the dull gleam of the ring on her finger, then her muscles went taut in a quick spring, and her white body flashed through the air like an arc of light. There was scarcely a splash where she entered, and his eyes followed her to the bottom of the pool; a bright, wavering shape she showed beneath the water, through which she shot unerringly towards him.

Her head broke the surface a yard away from him, and she put out a hand to his shoulder, not knowing how deep the water was. With the other she dashed back her hair and the water from her eyes.

"Here I am," she said simply. "We'll go for a swim together."

Craven slipped his arms around her. "You darling," he muttered huskily.

Next moment they struck out together side by side, and, leaving the pool, made into the open bay, as though, intoxicated by love, in the supreme confidence of youth, they felt they must, however momentarily, pit the strength of their lithe, glowing bodies against the cold power of the sea that heaved mile after mile ahead of them.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